

**Wednesday
25 May 2022**

**Volume 715
No. 10**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Wednesday 25 May 2022

House of Commons

Wednesday 25 May 2022

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that the ballot for the election of the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is currently taking place in the Aye Lobby. The ballot will be open until 2.30 pm. The side door between the Chamber and the Aye Lobby will be locked until the ballot has concluded.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Railway Infrastructure

1. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on railway infrastructure in Wales. [900135]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending love and best wishes to parents, teachers, and the village of Llanfair Caereinion in Powys following the traumatic incident involving their school on Monday. I hope very much that my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) will be able to pass on the House's very best wishes.

I regularly discuss rail infrastructure in Wales with the Secretary of State for Transport. More than £340 million has already been provided for rail enhancements in Wales, including the core valley lines and Cardiff Central station.

Christine Jardine: From the Queen's Speech, we learned of a new public sector body to oversee Britain's railways. Given the importance of the railway infrastructure and the benefits of linking north Wales to HS2, and in view of the problems, delays and cuts in services that we are seeing in Scotland owing to the mismanagement of ScotRail by the SNP—[*Interruption.*] Have Scottish National party Members tried taking a train this week?

Given those factors, can the Secretary of State tell us what discussions the Government have had with devolved Administrations to boost connectivity across the United Kingdom, and to ensure that lines are properly funded and appropriately managed?

Simon Hart: I do not know why some Members on the Opposition Benches were being so derogatory during the hon. Lady's extremely valid question. It was perfectly reasonable for her to highlight the fact that transport infrastructure in the UK is in the UK, and that any

suggestion that it should in some way be devolved underestimates completely the economic value that it provides.

I agree with the general comments that the hon. Lady made, but the UK Government have been working alongside the Welsh Government where they can on infrastructure projects, particularly those involving rail, and the record reinforces that. We are also spending many millions of pounds on infrastructure more broadly, and I think she will support that—along with, I hope, others on the Opposition Benches.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, there is considerable and long-standing support in north Wales for the electrification of the line between Wrexham and Bidston, which would link two important enterprise zones and put Wrexham and the whole of north-east Wales in commuting reach of Liverpool, and would be generally welcomed by the local business community. What discussions has he had with colleagues in the Department for Transport about advancing this project?

Simon Hart: My right hon. Friend has made a good point. The Government recognise the importance of the line to which he has referred, and I know that Liverpool City Region Combined Authority and Transport for Wales have been discussing the opportunities presented by battery-powered trains.

My right hon. Friend also made a good point about cross-border connectivity and the need for us to view these areas as economic regions and not be disrupted in any way by the artificial boundaries that devolution sometimes creates. I assure him that we will have further meetings with the Department for Transport about this issue.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): This Government cancelled Labour's plans for electrification of the line to Swansea, citing the pretext that it would not speed up journeys. However, there is an urgent need for electrification to combat climate change and decrease reliance on imported fossil fuels. Will the Secretary of State talk to his colleagues about reinstating the plans for electrification of that line, extending electrification further west through my constituency to the Pembrokeshire ports, and supporting these moves through increased investment in renewable forms of electricity generation?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady has raised, quite reasonably, a point that she has raised before. I agree with her on most of the issues that she has raised, apart from the background to the cancellation of electrification, a decision which, as she knows, was taken in the context of bimodal trains as an equally beneficial alternative. However, her general views about rail infrastructure and net zero are entirely shared by the Government. I hope that she might be able to make the same compelling case to her colleagues in Cardiff as she makes to us.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister, Gerald Jones.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Wales contains 11% of the UK's railway infrastructure, but in recent years has received only 1% of the Government's investment. As if that were not bad enough, classifying HS2 as an England and Wales project is denying Wales nearly £5 billion of investment. I know that the Secretary

of State does not like it when we remind the Welsh public that his Government is short-changing Wales, but now the leader of the Welsh Conservatives agrees with us, as does the Welsh Affairs Committee. Perhaps if the Government had given Wales a fair settlement to upgrade its railways, the Chancellor would not have had to fork out £10,000 for a helicopter to make a round trip from London to Powys. When will the Secretary of State use his position at the Cabinet table to ensure that his Government cough up?

Simon Hart: A good question interspersed with some slightly trite comments; the hon. Gentleman might have done better had he avoided them. He overlooks the fact we have invested £340 million so far, with £125 million for the core valley lines, £58 million for Cardiff Central station, £76 million for the electrification of the Severn tunnel, £4.7 million for St Clears station in my own constituency, £4 million for Bow Street station—I could go on forever. He underestimates and undervalues the investments we have already made.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Having represented a border community for the last 17 years, one is cognisant of the interdependence we have in Shropshire with Wales, with our friends across the border, with my right hon. Friend's Department and with the Senedd. We are campaigning in Shropshire for the electrification of the line from Birmingham to Shrewsbury, which will help passengers going on to mid-Wales. Will he take an interest in that scheme to ensure that the people of mid-Wales can benefit from quicker times to Birmingham via this electrification process?

Simon Hart: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend on that point. I have travelled that route myself many times, and I would be happy to see what we can do to help.

Costs of Living: Households and Businesses

2. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to mitigate the impact of rising costs of living on (a) households and (b) businesses in Wales. [900136]

4. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to mitigate the impact of rising costs of living on (a) households and (b) businesses in Wales. [900138]

10. **Ms Anum Qaisar** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent steps the Government have taken to mitigate the impact of rising costs of living on (a) households and (b) businesses in Wales. [900144]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): To alleviate the immediate impacts of this global crisis, we have injected support worth over £22 billion in 2023. For businesses, we have cut fuel duty and provided help to high energy-using businesses. In the longer term, our Plan for Jobs will ensure long-term prosperity for Wales, including the development of the Wylfa nuclear power station.

John Mc Nally: The Scottish Government introduced the Scottish child payment to tackle child poverty head on. That payment doubled to £20 and is set to increase further and be extended to children under the age of 15, resulting in 50,000 children being taken out of relative poverty. Given that Wales has persistently had the highest child poverty rate in the UK, does the Secretary of State not agree that welfare powers should now be devolved to Wales so that the Welsh Government can introduce a targeted child payment of their own?

Simon Hart: Even the Welsh Government have not made that argument to me. I think they fully recognise that the proper and fair distribution of welfare is done most effectively and cost-effectively on a UK-wide basis, but I am grateful that the hon. Gentleman has raised this issue because the money that the Scottish Government are using is available as a consequence of the Barnett formula, and the situation is the same in Wales.

Joanna Cherry: In relation to the cost of living crisis faced by people in Wales and across the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister told the Welsh Tory party conference that the UK Government would

“put our arms around the British people again as we did during covid”.

Based on the evidence of the Sue Gray report, they are more likely to be linking arms in a conga line. Can the Secretary of State for Wales tell me what discussions he has had with the Chancellor on an emergency Budget to help the poorest households in Wales and across the United Kingdom?

Simon Hart: The hon. and learned Lady rightly refers to the fact that the Chancellor may yet be making further comments about this particular issue, just as he did throughout the pandemic. For those who think that the Treasury is neither flexible nor conscious of these challenges, the fact is that there was ample evidence during the pandemic—and now, of course, during the current challenges we face—to disprove that theory. I can tell her, and everyone else in the House, that I have really regular conversations with Treasury Ministers and with the Chancellor himself about exactly these challenges.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Would my right hon. Friend agree that one of the best ways to help people during the cost of living crisis is to make sure that we have a vibrant economy and a low rate of unemployment? Would he also agree that having the lowest rate of unemployment since 1974 is helping many families across Wales and the rest of the UK at the moment?

Simon Hart: Absolutely. I think most people believe that growing our way out of a cost of living challenge is infinitely preferable to spending our way out of a cost of living challenge. My hon. Friend is right to point out that we want to be flexible, rapid and generous. When there are occasions, as there inevitably will be for Members across the House, where individual constituents somehow do not fit the solutions we have, there are other measures that I hope local authorities will be able to deploy to assist them.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): To what extent does the Secretary of State see investment in new nuclear as a way to help people with their energy costs in the long run?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure that links to Wales. It is a bit off the mark. If you had tried to link it to Wales, I could understand. If not, we will go to the shadow Secretary of State, Jo Stevens.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We now know that the energy price cap is expected to rise to £2,800 a year in October, which means that typical household bills in Wales, having already gone up by £700, will go up by another £800.

It is now 138 days since Labour proposed a windfall tax on oil and gas producer profits so that people across Wales can get help right now. Every day the Government delay is another day they are letting down people in Wales and across the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State voted against a windfall tax last week. What is his alternative to help the people of Wales, and where is it?

Simon Hart: I suspect the hon. Lady reads the same news channels I read, so she will be aware that the Treasury will make a further announcement imminently. *[Interruption.]* She may be annoyed by my answer, but it is only reasonable that I suggest she waits until the Chancellor sets out precisely what his plans are.

May I suggest that the hon. Lady applies equal pressure to her colleagues in Cardiff? They have the power to intervene on things like business rates, council tax and income tax, which they have not done. In the meantime, however, they are thinking of imposing a tourism tax, costing Welsh taxpayers £100 million in the process. They are buying a farm that nobody wants and providing free musical instruments to young people under the age of 16.

Jo Stevens: Welsh voters gave their verdict on the Welsh Government in the election the week before last, and there is not a single Tory council left in the whole of Wales. The Secretary of State's party was wiped out.

As the Secretary of State's answer demonstrates, he does not have a plan and we have not had a plan from the Chancellor. Does he think that buying value supermarket brands, getting a better-paid job or riding around on the buses all day to keep warm is the Government's answer to the cost of living crisis?

Simon Hart: The hon. Lady clearly did not listen, or did not want to listen, to my previous answer. When we know the Chancellor is about to make a statement in the Chamber on all these issues, would it not be more sensible to allow the Treasury to spell out exactly what its plans are and how they will benefit businesses and individual families in Wales before making such highly politicised comments?

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I add my party's commiserations to everybody affected by the bus accident in Llanfair Caereinion.

The Oakeley Arms in my constituency is a superb inn located in a grade II listed building at the heart of Snowdonia national park. It is off grid, it is limited by regulations on energy efficiency measures and its owners now face a quadrupling in energy bills. Does the Secretary

of State agree that small businesses need more support? Will he speak to the Chancellor about extending the price cap to our hard-pressed small and medium-sized businesses?

Simon Hart: I will definitely speak to the Chancellor, as I often do about these things. Perhaps I could suggest a deal to the right hon. Lady: I will speak to the Chancellor to get further information if she will speak to her leader in Cardiff to get him to call off the dogs by cancelling the tourism tax that the Welsh Government want to impose on businesses, causing further hardship for people in her constituency.

Liz Saville Roberts: If the Secretary of State kept to the powers he has in Westminster, perhaps he would have better support. There are now no Tory councillors in any of the Plaid-held councils along the west coast of Wales.

Rumours of an economic package are rife, not because the Government care about struggling households and businesses but because, of course, they want to distract from their own lawbreaking. Household energy bills will likely increase to £2,800 in the autumn, yet the Chancellor is sitting on his hands until it proves politically convenient. Is the Secretary of State not ashamed of his Government's behaviour?

Simon Hart: I despair sometimes, with the greatest respect. I urge the right hon. Lady to wait, for what should not be a great deal more time, to hear precisely what we have in store on the cost of living challenges. I remind her that, throughout the pandemic and the cost of living challenges, the Treasury has been unbelievably flexible, unbelievably adaptable and, in some respects, unbelievably generous. To try to pre-empt the Chancellor by making cheap political points undermines the value of what those contributions may be, and it does a disservice to the businesses and individuals that the right hon. Lady purports to support.

Freeports

3. **Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to support the development of plans for at least one freeport in Wales. [900137]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Wales Office has worked tirelessly to ensure there will be a freeport, which will deliver jobs and investment into Wales. As announced earlier this month, an agreement has now been reached between the UK and Welsh Governments to deliver that freeport, and this agreement will be backed by millions of pounds of Government funding.

Paul Holmes: I welcome the Government's decision to have at least one freeport in Wales like the Solent freeport, which covers part of my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as bringing jobs and trade to Wales, it will bring mutual benefits to other freeports, it will be vibrant, and it is a stark reminder of why the Union between Wales and England is so important?

David T. C. Davies: I agree with both of those excellent points. We have already seen that the Thames freeport has suggested that there will be 21,000 jobs directly and indirectly created, so we know that the Welsh freeport will deliver jobs. I also agree that it is going to be good

for the Union and good for Wales to have vessels of all kinds coming from all over the world, bringing their jobs and investment with them, including perhaps from across the Union—we may even look forward to seeing a few ferries from Scotland, if the SNP Government can actually get around to building them.

Cost of Living: Households in Newport West

5. **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on potential fiscal steps to help tackle the impact of the rise in the cost of living on households in Newport West constituency. [900139]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): My ministerial colleagues and I fully acknowledge that there is a cost of living challenge, which has been caused by a combination of the covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. That is why we are providing £22 billion for households across the UK to try to get through this crisis.

Ruth Jones: The people of Newport West are facing the harsh effects of this Government's failure to tackle the cost of living crisis. My constituent Hettie contacted my office because she is a single mum of two and must choose between food and heating. Both her cooker and her hot water are gas, so as the prices rise so do her bills. She works, in her words, "Every hour possible". She is scared for her and her children's future, and she is not alone. Local people need to see real action. If Tory Ministers will not take any fiscal steps, will the Minister do what many people in Newport West want and back a windfall tax on oil and gas companies?

David T. C. Davies: Taxes are a matter for the Chancellor, but what I can say is that I absolutely acknowledge that there is a challenge at the moment, which has been brought about by the international situation. That is why the Government are putting £22 billion aside. It is why they have changed universal credit to help people such as the hon. Lady's constituent who are out working, and why we have increased the minimum wage. It is why national insurance contributions are going to fall, we have extended the warm home discount and put in place a whole package of other measures. While we are spending money helping people get through the cost of living challenge, the Welsh Government are spending money buying up farms in mid-Wales and increasing the number of Senedd Members.

Trade and Foreign Direct Investment

6. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help increase trade and foreign direct investment in Wales. [900140]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Wales Office works closely with the Department for International Trade to promote the excellent opportunities that there are to invest in Wales. Wales is an attractive destination for foreign companies to come to, to invest in and to create jobs in, as we have seen with the continued support from companies such as Airbus, which only recently announced plans to increase wing production in Broughton.

Marco Longhi: As the trade envoy to Brazil, I see the huge economic growth opportunities for both the UK and Brazil in the post-Brexit and post-pandemic environment. Does my hon. Friend agree that, like Dudley North, Wales plays a huge part in UK plc and that therefore we want to see the Welsh dragon flying just as proudly as the Black Country flag?

David T. C. Davies: I am delighted to say that Wales has an excellent trading relationship with Brazil. In 2021, we exported nearly £85 million-worth of goods to the country, while importing £165 million-worth of goods. Wales has good trade and investment with countries across the world. We have seen 72 direct investments in the last financial year, with 1,500 jobs created. Only last week, the Secretary of State for Wales and I were with the Member for the Vale of Glamorgan looking at the new Aston Martin supercar factory in the Vale of Glamorgan.

Free Trade Agreements with Australia and New Zealand: Welsh Farmers

7. **Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for Welsh farmers following the implementation of the UK's free trade agreements with Australia and New Zealand. [900141]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): The Secretary of State for Wales and I have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues on free trade arrangements. The Wales Office works closely with the Department for International Trade to ensure that Wales will enjoy the benefits that will flood in both directions from free trade deals with Australia and New Zealand.

Chris Elmore: The Government's own impact assessment states that the Australia and New Zealand FTAs will see a reduction in gross value added in agriculture of more than £142 million. The measures are likely to have a disproportionate impact on Welsh agriculture because of its reliance on livestock and dairy farming. NFU Cymru is calling for Wales-specific impact assessments, so will the Minister ensure that they are delivered and that he starts working for Welsh farmers, rather than undercutting them and destroying the industry?

David T. C. Davies: I cannot really accept what the hon. Gentleman says. We were able to import lamb, beef and other kinds of food from Australia and New Zealand when we were members of the European Union. Both countries had an agreement that allowed them to export goods to us without paying tariffs, up to a certain quota, and the fact of the matter is that they never met that quota. It is a bit of a myth that there is cheap beef and lamb in Australia and New Zealand; anyone who wants to look at a website can see what people pay for those goods in Australian and New Zealand supermarkets. They have no plans to increase their flocks or herds. The trade deals that have been agreed are going to be good for farmers and for industry more widely throughout Wales.

Senedd Representation and Levelling-up Agenda

9. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What discussions his Department has had with the Welsh Government on the potential effect on the levelling-up agenda of proposals to increase the size of the Senedd. [900143]

13. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): What discussions his Department has had with the Welsh Government on the potential effect on the levelling-up agenda of proposals to increase the size of the Senedd. [900147]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I have had no discussions with the Welsh Government on the proposals.

Dr Davies: What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the proposed changes to the voting system at Cardiff Bay and the potential impact on democratic representation?

Simon Hart: It is mystifying that this proposal was announced on the same day as the Queen's Speech. It will impose a £100 million burden on Welsh taxpayers and demolish a voting system that has served us well for years, and there has been no consultation with any voters at all. Even the Lib Dems describe it as a stitch-up.

Danny Kruger: The Welsh Government have decided that they want to increase the size of the Senedd, but there are real concerns that that will lead to a lack of proportionality in representation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the money would be much better spent on public services?

Simon Hart: Indeed, I do. I have to say that if this Government were making suggestions of that nature that involved the constitution and voting measures, pretty well all Opposition Members would be saying that that should be subject to a public referendum at the very least. I suggest that the proper course of action for the Welsh Government is to seek the approval of their voters before they proceed with any of the extremely costly measures proposed.

Universal Credit

11. **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on trends in the level of people in (a) Rhondda constituency and (b) Wales in receipt of universal credit. [900145]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): My colleagues and I are aware that the number of people on universal credit has fallen both in Rhondda and across Wales over the past year. We will continue delivering for residents through schemes such as in-work progression, kickstart and our plan for jobs.

Chris Bryant: The thing is, 6,320 households in the Rhondda are in receipt of universal credit, and when the Government cut universal credit by £20 a week last year, that took £6.5 million out of the Rhondda economy. That is one reason why the food bank in Tylorstown—ironically, it is in the old Conservative club—now has to provide food to the tune of 3 tonnes a month, although

families are not able to contribute so much. When will the Secretary of State restore the extra £20 a week in universal credit?

Simon Hart: The Chancellor will make interventions clear in due course. The context to the hon. Gentleman's perfectly reasonable question is that there has been a 7% increase in the number of people in work in Rhondda and the number of people who are unemployed in Wales is down 23,000 in the past year—he did not mention that. I very much hope that the increases in the national living wage and the national minimum wage will help to offset some of the issues he has raised.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—who is my occasional friend, when he is not slagging me off on Twitter—is right to talk about the Rhondda, because there are areas of real poverty, as there are in parts in Lichfield. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that there are many ways to help people, some of which he has named, that there is an urgent need to address food and fuel inflation, and that that can be done in other ways, which the Treasury may well talk about, and not just by raising universal credit?

Simon Hart: On that particular point, I agree with my hon. Friend—I would probably describe him as my permanent friend. It is perfectly right that we wait and see what the Chancellor says. We have tried to set out short, medium and long-term measures that will help with the current challenge and we will of course hear more in due course.

Shared Prosperity Fund

12. **Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister of Wales on the shared prosperity fund. [900146]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I have regular discussions with the First Minister of Wales on a range of issues, including how Wales's £585 million share of the UK shared prosperity fund will level up communities across our country.

Wayne David: Does the Secretary of State share my concern that according to a number of independent analyses, the shared prosperity fund is likely to shift resources away from the valleys, the poorest parts of Wales, to more prosperous parts?

Simon Hart: Unsurprisingly, I contest the hon. Gentleman's assertion. I would just say this: by 2024-25, the annual funding from the shared prosperity fund will match the average annual funding that Wales would have received from the European Regional Development Fund after adjusting for inflation. If he does not take that from me, or does not believe me, I can tell him that it is from Guto Ifan, research associate at the Welsh Governance Centre. That indicates that we are going in the right direction with the shared prosperity fund. Would it not be good, just for a moment, if the Welsh Government supported those very ambitious opportunities?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know the whole House will want to join me in expressing our outrage and deep sorrow following the shooting at Robb Elementary School

in Texas. I know that our thoughts and prayers are with those affected and all of the families who have lost loved ones.

Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I want to welcome Nick Munting and his family to the Gallery. Nick has worked in Parliament for over 30 years, primarily as a sous chef but also as an Associate Serjeant at Arms. Unfortunately, Nick has had to leave his role because of ill health and he is much missed by his colleagues. I know that all Members, particularly the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones), Nick's constituency MP, will wish to join me in thanking Nick for his long service to the House and in sending good wishes to Nick and his family.

I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—
Engagements

Q1. [900220] **Anthony Browne** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 May.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Mr Speaker, I want to begin by echoing what you have just said about the reports of the fatal shooting in a Texan primary school. Our thoughts are with all those affected by this horrific attack.

Yesterday, I welcomed the Emir of Qatar to Downing Street. It is excellent news that Qatar announced that it will invest up to £10 billion in the UK through our new strategic investment partnership. Not only will that boost local economies and support jobs; it will support our green economy and decarbonisation.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Anthony Browne: Cambridge is one of the most expensive places in the country to live, but unlike many cheaper places, NHS workers in the city get no high cost of living supplement. NHS workers in Cambridge pay higher rents than NHS workers in outer-London boroughs, such as Redbridge, Croydon, Bexley and Barking, and yet they get paid 15% less. That makes it very difficult for the NHS in Cambridge, including Addenbrooke's Hospital, to retain and recruit staff. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister work with me to make sure that NHS workers in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge get paid fairly?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his constituents and for Addenbrooke's. We are very proud of our NHS, which is why we are putting in record investment. I hope that the independent NHS Pay Review Body will listen carefully to what he has just said.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): My thoughts and, I know, the thoughts of the whole House are with the families of the victims of yesterday's school

shooting in Texas. Nineteen children have died, some as young as seven, as well as two adults believed to be teachers. It is an unspeakable tragedy, and our hearts are with the American people.

Last weekend marked the anniversary of both the Manchester bombing and the murder of Lee Rigby, and we remember them this year as we do every year. Today is also the anniversary of the killing of George Floyd, a reminder that we must all tackle the racism that is still experienced by so many in our country and beyond.

The Sue Gray report was published this morning and I look forward to discussing that during this afternoon's statement with the Prime Minister. For now, I want to focus on the cost of living affecting the whole country.

Since we stood here last week and I asked the Prime Minister yet again to back Labour's plans for a windfall tax to reduce energy bills, hundreds of millions of pounds have been added to the bills of families across the country, and hundreds of millions of pounds have landed in the bank accounts of energy companies. It sounds like he has finally seen sense and the inevitable U-turn may finally have arrived, so when can people across the country expect him to use those oil and gas profits to bring down their bills?

The Prime Minister: There is nothing original about a Labour plan to tax business. Labour wants to tax business the whole time. Every day, the party wants to put up taxes on business. What we are doing is helping people. The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks when we are going to help people. We are helping people now. We are putting £22 billion into people's pockets already, cutting council tax by £150, cutting fuel duty, and cutting national insurance contributions by an average of £330 for people who pay NICs. How can we afford that? We can because we have a strong economy, because we came out of covid fast, which would not have been possible if we had listened to Labour.

Keir Starmer: Fifteen tax rises and the Prime Minister pretends they are a low-tax Government. It has been four and a half months since Labour first called for a windfall tax on oil and gas profits. I have raised it week in, week out, and every week he has a new reason for not doing it. The Business Secretary said it is "bad", the Justice Secretary called it disastrous, and even this weekend the Health Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary opposed it. The Prime Minister ordered all his MPs to vote against it last week, and now—surprise, surprise—he is backing it. Prime Minister, I am told that hindsight is a wonderful thing! [*Laughter.*] But while he dithered and delayed, households across the country suffered when they did not need to.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the right hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Mr Speaker: Mr Bone, a man who always wants to catch my eye, is not going the best way about doing so. I call Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer: While the Prime Minister dithered and delayed, households across the country suffered when they did not need to. What is it about the Sue Gray report that first attracted him to a U-turn this week?

The Prime Minister: There is no surprise about Labour's lust to put up taxes; there is nothing original about that thought. Labour Members get off on it; they absolutely love to confiscate other people's assets. What we prefer to do is make sure that we have the measures in place to drive investment in our country and drive jobs, and it is thanks to the steps that we took and thanks to the fact that we came out of covid faster than any other European country, which would not have been possible had we listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman, that we now have unemployment at the lowest—[*Interruption.*] Listen to this—Labour used to care about this, Mr Speaker. We now have unemployment at the lowest level since 1974. Put that in your pipe.

Keir Starmer: I actually thought that, with this U-turn, the Prime Minister might get his head out of the sand, but obviously not. The reality is that every day of his dithering and his delay, £53 million has been added to Britain's household bills. While he is distracted by trying to save his own job, the country has been counting the cost. But complacency is nothing new for this Government: back in October, the Chancellor delivered a mini-Budget that has to be reread to be believed. With inflation already climbing, he said that he understood people were concerned about it, and that the Government were "ready...to act". Since then, inflation has risen to a 40-year high—the highest rate of any G7 country. If the Government were so ready to act six months ago, why have they not done so?

The Prime Minister: The Government have acted, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor continues to act. This is the Government who not only put in the living wage—it was a Conservative institution—but have now raised it by £1,000, a record amount. Families on universal credit have another £1,000. Thanks to the £9.1 billion that we have already put in to support people's cost of heating, we are abating the costs of fuel for people up and down the country, and of course we are going to do more. We are going to put our arms around the people of this country, just as we did throughout the covid pandemic. We can do that because we took the tough decisions to drive the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, which would not have been possible if we had listened to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Let me take another statistic: youth unemployment—Labour used to care about it—is at or near a record low.

Keir Starmer: It was not just the Chancellor back in September—the Prime Minister called fears about inflation "unfounded". He was the last person to spot the cost of living crisis, just as he is the last person to back Labour's plan to help people through it. It was not just on inflation that they got it badly wrong. In the same speech, the Chancellor boasted about growth, as the Prime Minister does today, and how we would do better than all our major competitors. It was obvious that he was being complacent. Lo and behold, Britain is set to have the lowest growth of any major country except Russia, despite our brilliant businesses and all we have to offer. Why has his Government inflicted on Britain the twin-headed Hydra of the highest inflation and the lowest growth?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman loves running this country down. [*Interruption.*] How many times did he come to this place and say that

the United Kingdom had the highest covid death rate in Europe? How many times? He was proved completely wrong. Did he ever apologise? Absolutely not. Did he ever take it back? Absolutely not. Actually, because of the steps we took, last year we had the fastest growth in the G7, and we will return to the fastest growth by 2024-25, thanks to the decisions that this Government took. [*Interruption.*] Labour does not care about getting people into jobs. We care about the working people of this country and making sure we have a high-wage, high-skill, high-employment economy, and that is what we are delivering.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister talks about running this country down; he is running this country down! It was not just complacency on Labour's windfall tax, which he is now backing; it was not just complacency on inflation, which is now through the roof; and it was not just complacency on growth, which is now spluttering along at the back of the pack, because his Chancellor also claimed that people should

"keep more of the rewards of those efforts."—[*Official Report*, 27 October 2021; Vol. 702, c. 286.]

Then he put their taxes up. Does the Prime Minister want to explain to hard-working people, whose wages are running out sooner and sooner each month and who are facing astronomical bills and prices, just how his 15 tax rises since taking office have helped them to keep more of their rewards in their pocket?

The Prime Minister: First of all, what we are doing is making sure that after a huge pandemic we are funding our vital public services, which we can because of the steps that we took. What we are also doing is making sure that we put more money back into people's pockets through the measures I have outlined today, whether through cutting national insurance contributions, lifting the living wage or lifting universal credit. All that is made possible because we took the responsible and sensible steps to protect our economy throughout covid and then to come out strongly. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is completely wrong about this country's growth performance. He runs it down. He was proved wrong about covid, and he is going to be proved wrong again.

Keir Starmer: Just delusional.

Last week, I raised the case of Phoenix Halliwell, whose kidney condition means he needs daily dialysis and whose energy bill has gone through the roof as a result. I am glad that as a result, Government officials got in touch with Phoenix yesterday, and I hope that will result in more support for people who are vulnerable, but it should not be left to Labour to turn up week after week to make the Prime Minister aware of the consequences of his dither and delay.

I want to raise another issue where the Government are sleepwalking into disaster. With the summer holidays looming, there are reports that the Home Office already has a backlog of 500,000 passports to issue. That is potentially more than half a million people worrying whether they will get away this summer. Can the Prime Minister reassure people that they will not miss out on their holidays due to the failures of his Home Office?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman very much, but I can tell him, actually, that what we are doing is massively increasing the speed with

which the Passport Office delivers. To the best of my knowledge, everybody is getting their passport within four to six weeks. That is because we are driving the leadership of this country and we are getting things done that would never have been possible if we had listened to the Opposition. We got Brexit done when he voted 48 times—48 times—to undo the will of the people. We got the vaccine roll-out done when he would have kept us in the European Medicines Agency. We were the first European country to help the Ukrainians resist Vladimir Putin. Does anybody seriously believe for a second that the Opposition would have done it? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Some are trying to boo; some are trying to cheer. The worst of it is that I cannot hear the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Let me say very plainly: does anybody seriously think for a second that the Labour party would have done that when eight of the shadow Front Bench, including the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), who is mysteriously not in his place, voted recently to get rid of this country's independent nuclear deterrent, and when the Leader of the Opposition campaigned to put Vladimir Corbyn—I mean, sorry, Jeremy Corbyn—in Downing Street?

We get on. We do the difficult things. We take the tough decisions. Social care: we are fixing it. We deliver; they dither. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Prime Minister, we cannot both be on our feet. I am trying to help you; you have to help me as well. I am sure you have got to the end, because Mr Stuart is itching to get his question in.

Q4. [900223] **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): When the Prime Minister gets passionate, things get done. Brexit is done. The vaccine—*[Interruption.]* If the Opposition can contain themselves—the vaccine roll-out is done. So will he personally intervene so that the immunocompromised, like my constituent Scott, can get access to British wonder-drug Evusheld—not next winter, not next year, but now—so that they can enjoy this summer and enjoy their freedom, just like the rest of us?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend, who I know has taken a keen interest in this for a while, Evusheld has the potential to reduce the risk of infection. We must look at the evidence before we can make a decision about whether it should be available, but I will make sure that the Department of Health and Social Care keeps him updated on the progress we are making.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the leader of the SNP, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I want to join others today in expressing my deepest sorrow at the horrific events in Texas yesterday. Some 19 children and two teachers have needlessly lost their lives. Many of us in Scotland will be remembering the tragic events that took place in Dunblane 26 years ago. The thoughts and prayers of the SNP are with the

families suffering today, but we also hope that lawmakers will finally act to bring to an end the scourge of gun violence that plagues the United States.

The reports of the Prime Minister's and Downing Street's lawbreaking have been damning: empty bottles littering offices; rooms so crowded people were sitting on each other's laps; and security forced to intervene because parties were so outrageous. At the centre was the Prime Minister orchestrating it and grabbing a glass for himself to toast the partygoers. For eight months, we have heard every excuse under the sun, but now we have all seen the damning photo evidence. While people stayed at home to protect the NHS, the Prime Minister was engaging in drinking and debauchery that makes a mockery of the gut-wrenching sacrifices that each and every person made. Will the Prime Minister now take the opportunity and resign?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that, much as I appreciate his advice, he will have a further opportunity, which I am sure he will take with his customary length, to debate that matter in the course of the statement that will follow directly after PMQs.

Ian Blackford: These are serious matters, but it is all a joke to the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister has lost the trust of the public. He has lost what little moral authority he had left. The Prime Minister has apologised many times, but not because he feels any genuine remorse. He still refuses to even admit that there were parties and that he presided over them. He apologised for one simple reason: he got caught. The reality is that no apology will ever be enough for the families of people who lost loved ones—the families who followed the rules, who stayed at home while their nearest and dearest were dying, and who are now forced to look at photographs of the Prime Minister, surrounded by drink, toasting to a party in the middle of a lockdown.

If the Prime Minister will not accept that he must resign, those on the Tory Benches must act. This Prime Minister, who has broken the law and shown a cavalier attitude to the truth, cannot be allowed to remain in office. Time is up, Prime Minister. Resign! Resign before this House is forced to remove you!

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much, and I direct him to the report. I think it would be to his advantage to look through it and then I think we should return to it after PMQs.

Q6. [900225] **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): High streets and heritage mean a lot to the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke. Burslem and Tunstall, two of the great six towns of Stoke-on-Trent, are plagued with rogue and absent landlords who are only too happy to let shops sit empty and historically important buildings, such as the Price and Kensington Teapot Works, fall into ruin, which is why I introduced my Planning (Proper Maintenance of Land) Bill to increase fines on these ruinous owners. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that, as part of the Government's planning reform, he will adopt my Bill, which imposes a new unlimited fine, so these reckless reprobates can be held accountable?

Up the Vale for Saturday, Mr Speaker!

The Prime Minister: Hear, hear, Mr Speaker—up the Vale!

I thank my hon. Friend for his campaign, and I think he is entirely right. We have adopted the measures that he proposes in the Bill so that those who leave properties derelict unreasonably could face an unlimited fine.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I was pleased to meet the Prime Minister last week in Royal Hillsborough in my constituency. We welcome his commitment to introduce legislation to deal with the protocol and the Irish sea border, and to protect the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That will take some time. In the meantime, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, hard-pressed households in Northern Ireland are suffering from the cost of living crisis. Will the Prime Minister give me an assurance that any measures that are brought forward by the Chancellor in the near future to help hard-pressed households will apply to Northern Ireland, and that the protocol will not be allowed to prevent Northern Ireland citizens receiving the support they need from the Government at this time?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman very much. As he knows, I have already detailed to the House a package of measures to support families across the whole of the UK. I may say that I also think it would be an advantage to the people of Northern Ireland, in tackling the issues that we all face across the UK, if Stormont were to be restored.

Q7. [900226] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): The recent report on levelling up the rural economy highlighted many areas where more work is needed in small rural and coastal communities to ensure that they also benefit from our levelling-up agenda. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to ensure that levelling up reaches into rural and coastal Devon? Will he meet me and Helen Hurford, our excellent candidate in Tiverton and Honiton, to agree how we can progress our plans for Devon?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for Devon and rural communities, and I will ensure that both she and Helen Hurford get a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss her ideas further.

Q2. [900221] **Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): Rising fuel costs are causing serious problems for workers in car-dependent rural areas such as Ceredigion, and for carers and district nurses the situation has reached a crisis point. One carer from Ceredigion often has to travel 29 miles just to reach her first service user of the day and travels about 1,700 miles each month. Will the Prime Minister therefore consider extending the rural fuel duty relief scheme to areas such as Ceredigion to help my constituent and many like her to continue their invaluable work?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for his excellent question. Rural fuel duty relief is there to compensate motorists by helping retailers in some more remote rural areas where pump prices can be significantly higher. It currently operates on a geographical basis, but I am happy to ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister as fast as possible.

Q8. [900227] **John Stevenson** (Carlisle) (Con): Labour and socialism have failed the country because their failed policies interfere too much in people's lives, over-regulate, spend too much taxpayers' money, borrow too much and raise taxes. Will the Prime Minister tell the House what policies his Government will follow to ensure that we do not have a similar fate?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can. I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is absolutely right that Labour's instinct everywhere and always is to put up tax, with all its—*[Interruption.]* Well, Labour Members are bragging about it today—it is ludicrous. What we are doing is not only cutting people's contributions under national insurance but helping businesses to invest with the 130% super deduction that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor put in. That is helping us to have a high-wage, high-skill economy, with unemployment—yes, I have said this before, Mr Speaker—at its lowest since 1974.

Q3. [900222] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Days before the election of disgraced former Conservative MP Imran Ahmad Khan, his victim warned the Conservative party of the abuse that he had suffered.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is still an appeal, and sub judice applies, so the hon. Lady should be careful in how she words the question.

Gill Furniss: Shockingly, the party has failed to act on the report and still will not explain why. That is why Rotherham child sexual exploitation survivor Sammy Woodhouse has called for an independent investigation into the failure, warning that the Conservative party has “broken the trust of victims”.

Will the Prime Minister personally back that call and launch an independent investigation into the failure to act so that victims can have confidence that his party will never again turn a blind eye?

The Prime Minister: I hear what the hon. Member says and the sensitivity of the issues that she raises. Given the legal proceedings that are currently going on, I do not think it would be right to comment any further.

Q10. [900229] **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): While the politics of politics often gets all the attention, back in the real world millions of parents—I declare a quite obvious interest—are being held back by issues with childcare schemes, which have been a muddle under Governments of all political colours. The taxpayer is spending five to six billion quid a year and we have some of the highest costs in the world during a cost of living squeeze. Stroud parents and early years educators are also really stuck with the bureaucracy. I know that my right hon. Friend has personally asked Ministers to investigate options to reduce the costs of childcare. Will he tell us a little more about what we can do urgently, and will he work with me and the Onward think-tank on reforms?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend very much. She and I have talked about this. This is a subject in which I take a direct personal interest. There are things we can do to make childcare more affordable.

One issue is that not enough people take up tax-free childcare, so we need to have more take-up of what is on offer. We can also look at ways in which we can reform and improve the system.

Q5. [900224] Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Next month marks five years since the horrific Grenfell Tower fire which killed 72 people. My constituency of Vauxhall has many tall buildings similar to Grenfell. In 2019, the Prime Minister rightly told this House that where the inquiry recommends Government responsibility for fire safety, “we will legislate accordingly.” But last week the Government dropped the inquiry’s recommendation that a personal evacuation plan should be in place for disabled residents, claiming basic safety would be too expensive. Grenfell United said that that showed

“cutting costs is more important than the value of human life.”

Will the Prime Minister urgently reverse this deeply inhumane decision and not break another promise to this House?

The Prime Minister: Let us be clear: if there is an issue with fire safety in a building, extra steps should be taken and remediation should be made. When it comes to self-evacuation, the Home Office has launched a new consultation to support the fire safety of residents who are unable to self-evacuate, but if the hon. Lady has further representations to make on that point, I will be very happy to ensure she gets a meeting with a Minister in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Q15. [900234] Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Mr Speaker, I am not a cynical sort but I was slightly perplexed this week when the Cabinet Secretary and the director general of Government Propriety and Ethics, no less, were banned from attending my Committee, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, to give evidence. That meeting had been scheduled for two months. I cannot possibly think why, Mr Speaker. I wonder which particular subjects my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was most concerned about being raised by my Committee. Was it the case of undeclared loans and donations in kind, security insights into appointments to the House of Lords, or indeed the consultation of the Propriety and Ethics unit in ministerial appointments?

The Prime Minister: I know my hon. Friend is not a cynic; he is one of nature’s idealists. I will make sure that all relevant Ministers and civil servants appear before his Committee.

Q9. [900228] Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The Prime Minister is leading a long queue of Conservative MPs lining up to show how out of touch they are. Bills are rising and people are struggling. A quarter of people in work in Putney earn less than the London living wage. They do not need to be told how to budget better, to learn how to cook or how to buy value food. They are already doing so. When will the Prime Minister get a grip on this crisis and when will he bring in the windfall tax?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing for the people of Putney, and indeed the people throughout the country, is making sure that we invest now in protecting them, as I have said to the House and I have said repeatedly, not

just with the increases in universal credit, the living wage and the warm home discount and cutting fuel bills, but with the £330 cut in NICs. The reason we can do that is that we have a robust economic position and strong employment. That is giving us the revenue to pay and to cushion people at this difficult time. It would not have been possible if we had listened to the Labour party during covid.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): This weekend tens of thousands of Huddersfield sports fans are coming down to London. On Saturday, Huddersfield Giants are in their first rugby league challenge cup final for over a decade, and, on Sunday, it is Huddersfield Town in the championship play-off final for a place in the premier league. As well as wishing the best of luck to both Huddersfield teams, will the Prime Minister, agree with me that the best way that Labour-run Kirklees Council can honour the sporting tradition of Huddersfield is by following through with its pledge to house the new national rugby league museum in its birthplace, the George Hotel in Huddersfield, and not pull out of that deal, as it has indicated it wants to do?

The Prime Minister: Is that the Labour council pulling out of its deal? I am not surprised. All I can say is that I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign for a national rugby league museum and I urge him to take it up with the Arts Council or other relevant bodies.

Q11. [900230] Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): Under cover of the pandemic we have seen a massive shift in wealth from the poorest to the richest. A partying Prime Minister and a law-breaking rich list Chancellor have lined the pockets of their wealthy pals while upwards of 175,000 of our fellow citizens have died from covid, and they are now sitting on their hands and laughing in our faces as the cost of living crisis and fuel poverty could well leave thousands more to die of cold in their own homes. So when we saw pictures of the Prime Minister partying in the middle of the pandemic was he toasting his assault on the working class, and how on earth does he sleep at night with so much blood on his filthy, privileged hands?

The Prime Minister: From furlough onwards everything we have done since the pandemic began has been to get money into the pockets of the working people of this country; those are the people who time and again we have prioritised. I do not for a moment doubt that things are tough—I do not doubt it for a moment—but it is our intention to get this country through it, and we will get through it very well by putting our arms around people as we can, and as we will because of the fiscal firepower we have, but also by making sure that we continue with the high wage, high skill, high employment economy that we have. The best way to get money into people’s pockets is for them to have a job.

Jill Mortimer (Hartlepool) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that when the Leader of the Opposition spins his myth of a low tax Labour party, he clearly needs a memory jog? *[Interruption.]* May I remind Labour Members that in 2019 they all stood on a manifesto that would have inflicted the highest tax burden on the people of this country in peacetime—and that is probably why there are so few of them over there on the Labour Benches?

The Prime Minister: Yes, Labour campaigned to put up taxes on business to the highest level this country has ever seen; that was the Leader of the Opposition's ambition, and that is what they would do again. Be in no doubt, that is what they love to do—we can feel the lust for tax rising off those Opposition Benches—and that is why there has never been a Labour Government who left office with unemployment lower than when they came in.

Q12. [900231] **Christian Wakeford** (Bury South) (Lab): Yesterday the head of Ofgem advised MPs that the energy cap is due to increase to £2,800 in the autumn, more than double last year's cap. I know the Prime Minister has been busy drafting and redrafting his half-arsed apologies rather than helping the people of Bury South, but at which work event—[*Interruption.*] At which work event did he realise Labour's call was the right thing to do; considering he and his party voted against it last week? Is it just to save his own neck?

Mr Speaker: Order. I could not hear the question or the advice I was being given, and it might be helpful if I could hear both. Prime Minister, did you manage to hear the question?

The Prime Minister: I heard enough to have a rough idea of the nonsense the hon. Gentleman was talking. We are not only supporting people now but will continue to put our arms around the people of this country, as we did during the pandemic and beyond.

Mr Speaker: Can I just say that moderate language is what we normally use, but I do not hear it now? It does not suit the Chair and I do not think it suits the country.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Prime Minister will recall that I previously raised with him the plight of 170 British Council contractors who remain in Afghanistan in fear of their lives, 85 of whom are deemed to be at very high risk. I had a positive meeting with the refugee Minister, Lord Harrington, last week, but we face bureaucracy that is preventing the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office from helping these people now courtesy of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. Will the Prime Minister help us cut through that red tape and help these people, as we owe them a debt of obligation and time is running out?

The Prime Minister: I will see what we can do to help those particular people but I just remind the House that we not only evacuated 25,000 people under Op Pitting, which was a great credit to this country, but since then have supported 4,600 more to come to this country, and we will do what we can to help the people my hon. Friend mentions.

Q13. [900232] **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Jubilee LEAD Academy in my constituency, working with Nottingham citizens, recently asked me to visit the school to hear about their low pay

campaign. They are tired of seeing people in our community working hard but living in poverty. Bills are rising and inflation is at 9%, yet the Government seem incapable and, frankly, a little disinterested in doing anything to help out. Our children can see the need for emergency action; why cannot our Government?

The Prime Minister: Everybody in work—30 million workers—will get a tax cut in July, on top of everything that we are already doing, but that is not the end of what this Government are going to do to look after people. I told the House before this afternoon that we will continue to use our fiscal firepower to look after the British people through the covid aftershocks and beyond.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): On Monday at 3.25 pm, a school bus crashed into a group of schoolchildren in Llanfair Caereinion. Three children were airlifted to hospital, with another child and the bus driver taken by ambulance, and a fifth child was discharged at the scene. Everyone is in a stable condition. Clearly, this is a tragic accident that will stay with the community for some time. Will the Prime Minister join me and, I am sure, the whole House in sending our love and prayers to those in hospital? Will he also praise the teaching staff of both the primary and the high school, Wales Air Ambulance and Dyfed-Powys police for their heroic and continuing response to the community?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very sad incident. I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House will be with those who have been affected. I want to join him, in particular, in paying tribute to the emergency services and, of course, the teachers and staff at the school, who did so much to help.

Q14. [900233] **Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): My constituent, Robert Walker, sadly died last year. He worked for MI6 and, as such, disclosed in confidence that he was a gay man. That confidence was breached by the HR department at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Recently unearthed paperwork showed that that breach largely accounted for his wellbeing issues and enforced early retirement. Will the Prime Minister offer Bob's partner, Stephen Honeyman, a posthumous apology and commit to asking the FCO for a formal response to his treatment while he worked at MI6?

The Prime Minister: I begin by saying how grateful I am to the hon. Member for raising that case. I am afraid that I do not know directly about the events that she describes. What she says is very concerning and I will make sure that she gets a meeting with the relevant Minister as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: That ends Prime Minister's questions—for those who wish to leave. I say to the House, as we come to the next statement, that I expect moderate and temperate language.

Sue Gray Report

12.42 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): With permission, I will make a statement, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to Sue Gray for her report today, and I want to thank her for the work that she has done. I also thank the Metropolitan police for completing its investigation.

I want to begin today by renewing my apology to the House and to the whole country for the short lunchtime gathering on 19 June 2020 in the Cabinet Room, during which I stood at my place at the Cabinet table and for which I received a fixed penalty notice. I also want to say, above all, that I take full responsibility for everything that took place on my watch. Sue Gray's report has emphasised that it is up to the political leadership in No. 10 to take ultimate responsibility, and, of course, I do. But since these investigations have now come to an end, this is my first opportunity to set out some of the context, and to explain both my understanding of what happened and what I have previously said to the House.

It is important to set out that over a period of about 600 days, gatherings on a total of eight dates have been found to be in breach of the regulations in a building that is 5,300 metres square across five floors, excluding the flats—*[Interruption.]* Mr Speaker, I do think this is important, because it is the first chance I have had to set out the context. Hundreds of staff are entitled to work there, and the Cabinet Office, which has thousands of officials, is now the biggest that it has been at any point in its 100-year history. That is, in itself, one of the reasons why the Government are now looking for change and reform.

Those staff working in Downing Street were permitted to continue attending their office for the purpose of work, and the exemption under the regulations applied to their work because of the nature of their jobs, reporting directly to the Prime Minister. These people were working extremely long hours, doing their best to give this country the ability to fight the pandemic during—*[Interruption.]* Mr Speaker, I appreciate that this is no mitigation, but it is important to set out the context.

Mr Speaker: Order. I appeal to the House: I expect the statement to be heard, and I want everybody to hear it. I want the same respect to be shown to the Leader of the Opposition afterwards. Please: this is a very important statement. The country wants to hear it as well.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I am trying to set out the context, not to mitigate or to absolve myself in any way.

The exemption under which those staff were present in Downing Street includes circumstances where officials and advisers were leaving the Government, and it was appropriate to recognise them and to thank them for the work that they have done. *[Interruption.]* Let me come to that, Mr Speaker. I briefly attended such gatherings to thank them for their service—which I believe is one of the essential duties of leadership, and is particularly important when people need to feel that their contributions have been appreciated—and to keep morale as high as possible. *[Interruption.]* I am trying to explain the reasons why I was there, Mr Speaker.

It is clear from what Sue Gray has had to say that some of these gatherings then went on far longer than was necessary. They were clearly in breach of the rules, and they fell foul of the rules. I have to tell the House, because the House will need to know this—again, this is not to mitigate or to extenuate—that I had no knowledge of subsequent proceedings, because I simply was not there, and I have been as surprised and disappointed as anyone else in this House as the revelations have unfolded. Frankly, I have been appalled by some of the behaviour, particularly in the treatment of the security and the cleaning staff. I would like to apologise to those members of staff, and I expect anyone who behaved in that way to apologise to them as well.

I am happy to set on the record now that when I came to this House and said in all sincerity that the rules and guidance had been followed at all times, it was what I believed to be true. It was certainly the case when I was present at gatherings to wish staff farewell—the House will note that my attendance at these moments, brief as it was, has not been found to be outside the rules—but clearly this was not the case for some of those gatherings after I had left, and at other gatherings when I was not even in the building. So I would like to correct the record—to take this opportunity, not in any sense to absolve myself of responsibility, which I take and have always taken, but simply to explain why I spoke as I did in this House.

In response to her interim report, Sue Gray acknowledges that very significant changes have already been enacted. She writes:

“I am pleased progress is being made in addressing the issues I raised.”

She adds:

“Since my update there have been changes to the organisation and management of Downing Street and the Cabinet Office with the aim of creating clearer lines of leadership and accountability and now these need the chance and time to bed in.”

No. 10 now has its own permanent secretary, charged with applying the highest standards of governance. There are now easier ways for staff to voice any worries, and Sue Gray welcomes the fact that

“steps have since been taken to introduce more easily accessible means by which to raise concerns electronically, in person or online, including directly with the Permanent Secretary”.

The entire senior management has changed. There is a new chief of staff, an elected Member of this House who commands the status of a Cabinet Minister. There is a new director of communications, a new principal private secretary and a number of other key appointments in my office. I am confident, with the changes and new structures that are now in place, that we are humbled by the experience and we have learned our lesson.

I want to conclude by saying that I am humbled, and I have learned a lesson. Whatever the failings—*[Interruption.]* We will come to that. Whatever the failings of No. 10 and the Cabinet Office throughout this very difficult period—*[Interruption.]* And my own, for which I take full responsibility. I continue to believe that the civil servants and advisers in question—hundreds of them, thousands of them, some of whom are the very people who have received fines—are good, hard-working people, motivated by the highest calling to do the very best for our country. I will always be proud of what they achieved, including procuring essential life-saving personal protective equipment, creating the biggest testing

programme in Europe and helping to enable the development and distribution of the vaccine that got this country through the worst pandemic of a century.

Now we must get our country through the aftershocks of covid with every ounce of ingenuity, compassion and hard work. I hope that today, as well as learning the lessons from Sue Gray's report, which I am glad I commissioned—I am grateful to her—we will be able to move on and focus on the priorities of the British people: standing firm against Russian aggression; easing the hardship caused by the rising costs that people are facing; and fulfilling our pledges to generate a high-wage, high-skill, high-employment economy that will unite and level up across the whole of our United Kingdom. That is my mission, that is our mission, that is the mission of the whole Government, and we will work day and night to deliver it. I commend this statement to the House.

12.52 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): The door of No. 10 Downing Street is one of the great symbols of our democracy. Those who live behind it exercise great power, but they do so knowing that their stay is temporary. Long after they have gone, that door and the democracy it represents will remain firm and unyielding. But Britain's constitution is fragile. It relies on Members of this House and the custodians of No. 10 behaving responsibly, honestly and in the interests of the British people. When our leaders fall short of those standards, this House has to act.

For months, Conservative Members have asked the country to wait—first for the police investigation, which concluded that this Prime Minister is the first in our country's history to have broken the law in office, and then for the Sue Gray report. They need wait no longer. That report lays bare the rot that, under this Prime Minister, has spread in No. 10, and it provides definitive proof of how those within the building treated the sacrifices of the British people with utter contempt. When the dust settles and the anger subsides, this report will stand as a monument to the hubris and arrogance of a Government who believed it was one rule for them, and another rule for everyone else.

The details are stark. Five months ago, the Prime Minister told this House that all guidance was completely followed in No. 10, yet we now know he attended events on 17 December. At least one of those attending has received a fine for it, deeming it illegal. We know that on 18 December, an event was held in which staff “drank excessively”, which others in the building described as a “party”, and that cleaners were left to mop up the red wine the next day. On 20 May, as a covid press conference was taking place, one of the Prime Minister's senior officials was told, “Be mindful; cameras are leaving. Don't walk about waving bottles.”

It is now impossible to defend the Prime Minister's words to this House. This is about trust. During that 20 May press conference, the British public were told that normal life as we know it was a long way off, but that was not the case in No. 10. Even now, after 126 fines, they think it is everyone else's fault but theirs. They expect others to take the blame while they cling on. They pretend that the Prime Minister has somehow been exonerated, as if the fact that he only broke the law once is worthy of praise. The truth is that they set the

bar for his conduct lower than a snake's belly, and now they expect the rest of us to congratulate him as he stumbles over it.

No. 10 symbolises the principles of public life in this country: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. But who could read this report and honestly believe that the Prime Minister has upheld those standards? The reason the British public have had to endure this farce was his refusal to admit the truth or do the decent thing when he was found to have broken the law. This report was necessary because of what Sue Gray describes as

“failures of leadership and judgment”,

for which senior political leadership “must bear responsibility”. It is that failure of leadership that has now left his Government paralysed in the middle of a cost of living crisis. The Prime Minister has turned the focus of his Government to saving his own skin. It is utterly shameful. It is precisely because he cannot lead that it falls to others to do so. I have been clear what leadership looks like. [*Interruption.*] I have not broken any rules, and any attempt—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just calm it down? Quite rightly, I wanted to hear the Prime Minister; the same goes for the Leader of the Opposition. Those who do not wish to hear, please go and have a cup of tea or something.

Keir Starmer: I have been clear what leadership looks like. I have not broken any rules, and any attempt to compare a perfectly legal takeaway while working to this catalogue of criminality looks even more ridiculous today, but if the police decide otherwise, I will do the decent thing and step down. The public need to know that not all politicians are the same—that not all politicians put themselves above their country—and that honesty, integrity and accountability matter.

Conservative Members now also need to show leadership. This Prime Minister is steering the country in the wrong direction. Conservative Members can hide in the back seat, eyes covered, praying for a miracle, or they can act to stop this out-of-touch, out-of-control Prime Minister driving Britain towards disaster. We waited for the Sue Gray report. The country cannot wait any longer. The values symbolised by the door of No. 10 must be restored. Conservative Members must finally do their bit. They must tell the current inhabitant, their leader, that this has gone on too long. The game is up. You cannot be a lawmaker and a lawbreaker, and it is time to pack his bags. Only then can the Government function again. Only then can the rot be carved out. Only then can we restore the dignity of that great office and the democracy that it represents.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about what went on in No. 10 Downing Street and the events behind that black door, and about the number of events. All I will say to him is that he, throughout the pandemic, was not leading many thousands of people in the fight against coronavirus. He was sniping from the sidelines and veering from one position to the next, and today he has done it again. Week after week, he could have come to this House and talked about the economy, about Ukraine, about the cost of living—but no, Mr Speaker: time after time, he chose to

[*The Prime Minister*]

focus on this issue. He could have shown some common sense, and recognised that when people are working very hard together, day in day out, it can be difficult to draw the boundary between work and socialising. And yet, after months of his frankly sanctimonious obsession, the great gaseous zeppelin of his pomposity has been permanently and irretrievably punctured by the revelation that—he did not mention this—he is himself under investigation by the police.

I am not going to mince my words. I have got to say this. Sir Beer Korma is currently failing to hold himself to the same high standards that he demanded of me. It is true. He called for me to resign when the investigation began. Why is he in his place? Why—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Holden, for the second time, I ask you please to help me to help you, because I am sure you want to hear the rest of this.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman should at least be consistent, and hold himself to the same standards. He is still there, and so is the deputy Leader of the Opposition.

I apologised when the revelations emerged, and I continue to apologise. I repeat that I am humbled by what has happened, and we have instituted profound changes throughout No. 10, but in view of the mess in which the right hon. and learned Gentleman has found himself, it would now be sensible for him, too, to apologise, so that we can all collectively move on. That, I think, is what the people of this country want to see above all. They want to see leadership from this House of Commons, and leadership from both parties, in dealing with their priorities. That is why we are focused on getting through the aftershocks of covid, that is why I am proud of what we did to roll out the fastest vaccine campaign in Europe, and that is why I am proud that we now have the lowest unemployment in this country for 50 years. That is what the people of this country want. I appreciate that the right hon. and learned Gentleman has his points to make, but I think that, overwhelmingly, the will of this country is for us now to say thank you to Sue Gray and for us collectively to move on.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): My right hon. Friend well knows that the rules apply to him as much as to all of us, and the rules of this House make clear that anyone who comes here and deliberately lies and misleads the House should leave their position, resign or apologise. My right hon. Friend has been asked many times about specific incidents and events that Sue Gray has outlined. Has he on any occasion come to the House in response to specific questions about specific events, and deliberately lied to us?

The Prime Minister: No, Mr Speaker, for the reason I have given: that at the time when I spoke to this House, I believed that what I was doing was attending work events, and, with the exception of the event in the Cabinet Room, that is a view that has been vindicated by the investigation.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Scottish National party, Ian Blackford.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): As I speak, the public are poring over the sordid detail of what went on—out of the public eye, behind the high gates and walls of the Prime Minister's residence. The report is damning. It concludes that many gatherings and many individuals did not adhere to covid guidance; that

“events...were attended by leaders in government”

and

“should not have been allowed to happen”;

that

“junior civil servants believed that their involvement...was permitted given the attendance of senior leaders”;

that there was an “unacceptable”

“lack of respect and poor treatment of security and cleaning staff”;

and, crucially, that:

“The senior leadership at the centre, both political and official, must bear responsibility for this culture.”

That leadership came from the top, and the Prime Minister—in the words of the report—must bear responsibility for the culture. A fish rots from the head.

The Prime Minister's Dispatch Box denial of a party taking place on 13 November is now proven to be untrue. He was there on 13 November, photographed, raising a toast, surrounded by gin, wine, and other revellers. The charge of misleading Parliament is a resignation matter; will the Prime Minister now finally resign?

This Prime Minister has adopted a systematic, concerted and sinister pattern of evasion. Truthfulness, honesty and transparency do not enter his vocabulary. That is just not part of his way of being, and it speaks for the type of man that he is. Credibility, truth and morality all matter, and the Prime Minister has been found lacking, time and again.

The Prime Minister indicated dissent.

Ian Blackford: The Prime Minister can shake his head, but that is the reality. Ethics have to be part of our public life, and ethical behaviour has to be at the core of the demeanour and the response of any Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister brings shame on the office, and has displayed contempt, not only to the Members of this House but to every single person who followed the rules—those who stayed away from family, those who missed funerals, those who lost someone they loved. So I hope that when Tory Members retire to the 1922 Committee this evening, they will bear in mind the now infamous Government advertisement featuring a desperately ill covid patient. It says:

“Look her in the eyes and tell her you never bend the rules.”

If those Tory Members do not submit a letter—if they do not remove this Prime Minister—how will they ever look their constituents in the eye again?

The Prime Minister: I think that the right hon. Gentleman should look closely at Sue Gray's report, and I repeat my thanks to her. I stress that the nature and length of my involvement in these events is very clear from what she says, and I take full responsibility for what happened. That is why we have taken the steps that we have to reform and improve the way in which No. 10 works. We are humbled by what has happened, and we have changed it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Since my election to the House, I have been running a campaign called “Listening to Wellingborough and Rushden”. Members may recall that on one occasion members of that group asked me to present a letter at Prime Minister’s Question Time calling for a previous Prime Minister to resign. What they are telling me today is that their concerns are the terrible war in Ukraine, illegal immigrants crossing the channel, and the economy, and their message to the Prime Minister is, “Get on with the job”. Does the Prime Minister agree with the “Listening to Wellingborough and Rushden” campaign?

The Prime Minister: I agree with them profoundly and passionately, and that is exactly what I am going to do.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that on 13 November 2020, he attended the “Abba party” briefly. His defence was a job interview. Can he confirm that he was only in his flat, and that he met Henry Newman to discuss a job, and can he tell us what the other special advisers were doing? Were they part of the job interview as well?

The Prime Minister: That evening was extensively investigated, to the best of my knowledge, and I do not believe I can improve on what Sue Gray has had to say.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): This is a damning report about the absence of leadership, focus and discipline in No. 10, the one place where we expect to find those attributes in abundance. I have made my position very clear to the Prime Minister: he does not have my support. A question I humbly put to my colleagues is: are you willing, day in day out, to defend this behaviour publicly? Can we continue to govern without distraction, given the erosion of the trust of the British people? And can we win a general election on this trajectory?

The question I place to the Prime Minister now—*[Interruption.]* I am being heckled by my own people. If we cannot work out what we are going to do, the broad church of the Conservative party will lose the next general election. My question to the Prime Minister is very clear: on the question of leadership, can he think of any other Prime Minister who would have allowed such a culture of indiscipline to take place on their watch? And if they did, would they not have resigned?

The Prime Minister: To answer the question that my right hon. Friend put to all of us on these Benches, I think the answer is overwhelmingly and emphatically yes, we are going to go on and win the next general election and we are going to get on with the job.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Prime Minister says he is sorry, but he is only sorry he got caught. He did not care then, as he partied during lockdown, when people could not see their dying loved ones. He did not care last year when he insisted that no rules had been broken. And he does not care now, when families across our country are struggling to heat their homes, fill their cars, and put food on the table, with a cost of living crisis that has only deepened while the Prime Minister has been scrambling to save his own

skin. Can the Prime Minister look the British people in the eye and name one person, just one person, he cares about more than himself?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that there are people in No. 10 Downing Street, including me, who cared passionately about making sure that we had the PPE we needed, that we had the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, and that we protected this country from covid. That is what people were doing, and I may say that the abuse that has been directed at civil servants and officials is wholly unwarranted.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): When I think of civil servants and advisers during that period, I think of the brilliant civil servants who helped move mountains to create the shielding programme within a matter of days and the brilliant civil servants and advisers who got 90% of homeless people off the streets within days. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these achievements and others should mean that nothing in this report is a stain upon the character of the thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of civil servants, whether in No. 10, other Departments or across the country who helped to steer this country through the pandemic? Secondly—difficult though this is for many to say—with a war in Europe, an economic crisis and the challenges this country faces, is it not true that it is now time to turn a page, and for this country, our politics and this House to move forwards?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend absolutely and passionately. We can study the report and we can draw the conclusions that we want, but the best thing now for our country is to move forwards together, and that is what we are going to do.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): We all understand, and the Prime Minister understands, that not being truthful on the Floor of this House requires a resignation. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) asked the Prime Minister a point-blank question on the Floor of this House when he was at the Dispatch Box. She asked him if he had been to a party on 13 November in 10 Downing Street. He said he had not and that no party had happened. There are four pictures of it featured in the Sue Gray report. Will the Prime Minister account now, on the Floor of the House, for his answer to that very specific question?

The Prime Minister: Yes of course, and I tried to do it in what I said earlier. The answer is that it is part of my job to say thank you to people who work in Government, and that is what I was doing. I believed it was a work event and, indeed, there has been no fine issued to me as a result of my attendance at that event, because that is what I was doing.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I commend Sue Gray for the report and I understand why people are angry. Having looked at the pictures of the birthday party in the Cabinet Office, I think the Opposition are going to be quite hard pressed to explain why they have such moral outrage about that but not about the late-night beers that happened in Durham. However, one of the things I was very troubled by was the language used towards the custodian. Will the Prime Minister join me now—I am sure the whole House would agree—in

[*Claire Coutinho*]

expressing the level of respect and gratitude we have to every single cleaner and worker, including all the people in the Tea Room, who work in this place?

The Prime Minister: I agree very much with what my hon. Friend has just said. As I said in my opening statement, any rudeness towards a member of staff is absolutely inexcusable and I want whoever was responsible to apologise.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I feel as if I have completely let down those who showered me with so much love. Why wasn't I by the bedside of my lovely grandmother during her final few days? Why did I let her die alone in that hospital? Why did I not attend the funeral of my uncle? It was because of worries about Government restrictions on numbers. And why did I not go to comfort my brother-in-law's father as he was dying in a Slough care home? With all of this context, it is utterly hypocritical for those very individuals who were preaching to us ad nauseam about patriotism, the flag and the Queen to be having late-night parties, including two on the night before the Queen had to sit all alone during her husband's funeral when the country was in a state of national mourning. Absolutely shameful. Given that the Prime Minister is not going to do the right and honourable thing, does he agree that it is not the support and sympathy of the British people that are keeping him in power, the majority of whom want him to resign, but the support and sympathy of those—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but this is meant to be a question. Also we do not normally bring the monarchy into proceedings. I am sure that the Prime Minister will have got the gist. I understand the emotions behind this, but questions have to be shorter.

The Prime Minister: I am very sorry for the hon. Gentleman's loss. He has a perfect right to speak with the passion that he does. All I can say is that I take full responsibility for what happened, and we have made extensive changes.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I believe both leaders have a lot to answer for with regard to this issue. The British Army teaches us, or certainly believes at its very core, that we serve to lead and we lead by example. Given the extent of rule breaking in No. 10, does my right hon. Friend believe that what he has said to the House since about there being no rule breaking passes the test of reasonableness?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is asking exactly the right question and I understand why he asks it. But I have tried to give my answer to him and to the House, which is that I believed that I was attending work events—those are the ones of which I had knowledge—and with the exception of what took place in the Cabinet room in June 2020, that view has been sustained by the investigation.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Neither I nor my Edinburgh South West constituents would wish to live in a state where the Government of the day can influence the police in the exercise of their duty to investigate without fear or favour, so we are puzzled as to why the Prime Minister did not receive questionnaires

in respect of three gatherings for which other people in No. 10 received questionnaires. We are also puzzled as to why the ABBA party in the Prime Minister's flat has never been investigated by either Sue Gray or the Metropolitan police. What can be done by way of an independent investigation to assure me and my constituents that the Metropolitan police have not been nobbled?

The Prime Minister: That would greatly surprise me. I think the hon. and learned Lady should look more closely at Sue Gray's report, where she will find the answer she seeks.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I understand the outrage of people in Lichfield and Burntwood, and indeed the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who have lost loved ones, but I also understand, having been an employer, that attending a leaving event is considered to be a work event. My right hon. Friend clearly had guidance that turned out to be wrong, so can he now explain how the appointment of a new permanent secretary at No. 10 will make a difference?

The Prime Minister: The structure of No. 10 has changed. There is more direct command and control of the whole building, which was a little unclear, and there is a new permanent secretary with direct responsibility for the whole office—hundreds and hundreds of people—as opposed to that function nominally being addressed by the principal private secretary. As Sue Gray says, the lines of command were not clear.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): After months of shuffling around, prevarication and buck passing, this report makes it absolutely clear that, when the British public were taking the restrictions seriously, the Prime Minister was taking the British public for fools. That is why the Prime Minister and his Government cannot be taken seriously. Is it not time he said goodbye so that the rest of us can say good riddance?

The Prime Minister: I really do not think the Government can be blamed for the delay that the hon. Member complains of. It took a long time for the Met to do its work, which was exhaustive, and I do not believe that it sustains the conclusion he has drawn—not at all.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): When I asked the Prime Minister about Sue Gray's interim findings on 31 January, he asked me to wait for the inquiry report—he asked many hon. Members that day to do the same. Subsequently, he has asked the media to wait for the findings of the inquiry report, and he knows that many Conservative colleagues have told their constituents that they are waiting for the inquiry report. So I was very surprised to read an intimation in *The Times* that he may have asked Sue Gray not to publish the report at all. Is there any truth to that suggestion?

The Prime Minister: What Sue Gray has published is entirely for Sue Gray. It is a wholly independent report.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The last time I asked the Prime Minister a question on this subject, I said that the problem with him—and I have got on with him over the years—is that he is a serial offender. Even serial offenders, if they confess to doing wrong and repent for what they have done, can be

forgiven because they are mending their ways. I am sorry, but his performance today shows no real remorse. He is trying to pass the buck to other people. Like many I see on the Conservative Benches, I believe he should now resign.

The Prime Minister: I have apologised and, as I said, I am deeply contrite about what happened. I take responsibility. We have already made a huge amount of change in No. 10, and it is my judgment that the best thing for the country is now to move on from this issue and to learn the lessons.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the cavalier way in which these rules were interpreted in No. 10, does my right hon. Friend agree that rules of such intrusiveness and rigidity must never again be imposed on the British people as a whole?

The Prime Minister: We were dealing with an unprecedented pandemic, and we did not have any immediate tools to control it, short of a vaccine, without asking people to restrict their behaviour. I am sure there are plenty of lessons we can learn for the future about how to do it better, and that will be a matter for the inquiry.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Although the Prime Minister is still, unwittingly, a great asset for Scottish independence, the question everywhere is this: how to goodness is he still the Prime Minister of this current United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: The answer to that question is contained in the continued support of the people of the United Kingdom for our Union. Despite everything the SNP is doing to try to overturn the democratic verdict of 2014, I do not believe it will succeed.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his further apology and explanation today, which is important to many of my constituents. Does he note that paragraph 4 on page 36 of the Sue Gray report says

“there have been changes to the organisation and management of Downing Street and the Cabinet Office with the aim of creating clearer lines of leadership and accountability”?

Does he agree with Sue Gray that these changes need to be in, that the focus of our Government must be laser-like in tackling the cost of living crisis that has come about as a result of the covid pandemic and Ukraine, and that, over and above everything else, this is the concern of my constituents?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Answer!

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asks me to answer, and I will. I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), which is why we will get on with the job.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What a load of baloney. Excuse after excuse after excuse, and it simply does not wash with the British public, who are sick and tired of being taken for fools. The truth is that the Prime Minister encouraged the gatherings, he attended the gatherings, he poured the drinks at the gatherings and he even

raised a toast at the gatherings, so he knew perfectly well that these gatherings had taken place. The most despicable thing of all is that Sue Gray says she saw

“multiple examples of a lack of respect and poor treatment of security and cleaning staff.”

They knew what the rules meant, even if nobody else did. Does the Prime Minister show no contrition, no sense of shame, that Downing Street, under him, has been a cesspit full of arrogant, entitled narcissists?

The Prime Minister: As I have already said to the House, it is absolutely disgraceful, in any circumstances, to be rude to the people who help us—the staff and custodians. It is intolerable, and I will make sure that those who are guilty of it apologise or are otherwise disciplined.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Now we have had this report and the Prime Minister has repeatedly apologised, does he not agree that we should be focusing on the real issues that matter to the British public—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Both of you need to have a cup of tea outside, because I cannot hear the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) with you both shouting at each other.

A separate debate was trying to be created, but we do not need to worry anymore.

Jack Brereton: Does the Prime Minister not agree that we should focus on the real issues that matter to the British people: the cost of living and Russia's invasion of Ukraine? Given what happened in Durham, the only people left to apologise in this Chamber are on the Labour Front Bench.

The Prime Minister: Yes. People in glass houses should not throw stones.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): To call this a damning report for the Prime Minister is an understatement. It states:

“The senior leadership at the centre, both political and official, must bear responsibility for this culture.”

For 168 days, the Prime Minister has used Sue Gray as a human shield against this duty. In this farce of a parliamentary system, it is now all down to Tory MPs—and there are not many of them left in the Chamber—to grow a backbone and oust this moral vacuum of a Prime Minister. Will he spare them the trouble and resign?

The Prime Minister: No.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): I thank Sue Gray for her report and, of course, the Metropolitan police for concluding their inquiry. Does the Prime Minister agree that investigations should be carried out without outside interference or statements towards the police or others? Will he now urge the Leader of the Opposition to respect this, too, with regards to Durham constabulary?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that sounds like very sound advice.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): My mother, my father-in-law and my mother-in-law are just three of the nearly 180,000 people who have died from covid-19 in Britain. Laws were broken by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and others, and these were not victimless crimes; these were not silly rules and meaningless red tape—they were designed to protect lives. The doctors and nurses who cared for my relatives at North Manchester General Hospital were not clocking off for “wine time Friday”. So for the first time in his life, will the Prime Minister do the right thing, and resign?

The Prime Minister: No, but I want to assure the hon. Gentleman that I understand the reasons why he feels as he does. I also want to say that everybody in No. 10 took the pandemic with the utmost seriousness. I grieve for his loss. We were doing our best to contain a very, very difficult situation.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that I voted against much of the covid legislation over the past couple of years, because I felt that a lot of it was pettifogging, ridiculous and unnecessary. I think this entire House should apologise to the British people for allowing a lot of this nonsense legislation to be in place. Whereas I take great comfort in and have respect for the fact that the courts tend to come to the same conclusion for the same offences, it would seem that the legislation we passed allowed an individual police force to come to different conclusions and certainly allowed different police forces to do so. From the photos I have seen, I would much rather have been at the curry and beer than the birthday party the Prime Minister had in the Cabinet room.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. All I can say is that those matters are for the relevant forces.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I do not believe that the Prime Minister has any credibility left, because my constituents tell me that they do not believe what he says. So I want to ask the Prime Minister about what I think is the bare minimum in this situation: cleaning staff and security staff in No. 10 were treated with a lack of respect, so has he personally apologised to them?

The Prime Minister: This is the first I have seen of the detailed criticisms of civil servants for that abuse. I have said that I think it is intolerable and I will make sure that staff, custodians and cleaners who were treated disrespectfully get a proper apology—

Alison McGovern: From you?

The Prime Minister: I have apologised to them today already from this Dispatch Box.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Rarely in my 21 years in this House have I heard such utter drivel as we have been presented with today. I have tried to find words to capture what the Prime Minister said: disingenuous, delusional, slippery, self-serving—I know that I cannot say “dishonest” in this place. There has been no attempt at remorse; it is all somebody else’s fault. Surely if he was half the man he thinks he is, he would summon that self-respect and just go.

The Prime Minister: I direct the hon. Gentleman to what I have already said.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I want to quote the following to the Prime Minister and all those on his side—we have just heard one of them—who suggest that the covid rules did not matter. It is from palliative care doctor, Dr Rachel Clarke:

“To NHS staff, it was always abundantly clear that the way you survive a pandemic is together.”

She goes on to say that, in 2020,

“Collective compliance...was really all our patients had”

to protect them, and “basic, selfless, public decency” mattered. Rules were

“Hated yet obeyed, because we care about each other... And that glass of wine in the prime minister’s hand? It’s been thrown into the faces of us all.”

How does he reply to that?

The Prime Minister: I wish things could have been handled better and I wish we had got things right in No. 10 in the way we did not. I apologise again for things that we got wrong, but we have already changed the way we work and I really think it is time that the country moved on.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Prime Minister has previously stated that partygate investigations would be complied with fully, but today there are reports that senior staff simply did not answer the questionnaires and, as a result, have avoided being fined. Can he therefore confirm whether all senior staff at No. 10, including himself, met their obligations and replied to the Metropolitan police in full?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, those are matters for the Met.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The Prime Minister said:

“I briefly attended such gatherings to thank them for their service, which I believe is one of the essential duties of leadership”.

He would not know leadership if it hit him in the face—that is where my constituents stand, and I will tell him why. Doctors gave their lives and their families were not allowed to attend their funerals. I was on the phone when the trust that I work with had to make leadership decisions to separate people and not let them see their dying relatives; I was on the phone to somebody while a person died—they were begging me to let them see him. That is what leadership is; those were difficult decisions they had to make. Nurses could not go home and had to book into hotels so that they did not spread infections. If the Prime Minister had an ounce of leadership, he would resign. So why doesn’t he?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to what I have already said.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s credibility is like a tyre with a slow puncture. He reinflates it occasionally, but is it not the truth that his party needs a new front wheel?

The Prime Minister: I think Opposition Members really need to ask a new question.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I am absolutely appalled by the behaviour of some Members in this Chamber today. They are refusing to accept responsibility. They are jeering and cheering, and saying, “Let’s move on.” May I tell the Prime Minister that there is a young man in Blackburn who cannot move on? He had a “wart” on his head, but rather than get an appointment with a doctor he was asked to send in a picture. Three months later, he was told that he had stage 4 cancer. So the impact is widespread and the damage is long-lasting, and this young man cannot even get the treatment he needs because he is told it will not be funded. Does the Prime Minister feel no shame at totally trashing rules that he made and expected other people to live with? He wants to move on and other people are left with the consequences. Surely the Prime Minister must resign.

The Prime Minister: No, we want to get on with addressing the covid backlogs, which is what we are doing.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I sometimes wonder whether the Prime Minister has a neck of pure brass. Does he understand and recognise the words “honesty”, “integrity” and “accountability”? From my position, it does not seem as though he does. Many Members have spoken of personal things and personal tragedies they have gone through. The country needs a new leader. Yes, we need to move on, but we should not need to lead on with him. Will the Prime Minister now resign?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I think I am just going to repeat my previous answer.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s leadership—his behaviour—drives the culture not only in our politics, but in our country. It also gives licence to others to behave in a similar manner. So if he is genuine in his apology, and—[*Interruption.*] Will he, first, ensure that the ministerial and Members’ codes have the Nolan principles incorporated into them and put them into statute? Secondly, will he condemn those Oldham Conservative candidates who delivered toxic racist and misogynistic leaflets during the recent local elections? His chairman has details of that.

The Prime Minister: I would be very happy to look at those details if the hon. Lady will send them to me.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): “Serve to lead” is the motto of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and everybody serving in our armed forces knows that if the commanding officer of a unit presided over the kind of shambles we have seen in Downing Street, they would be discharged of their duties. Why is it different for the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Is the hon. Gentleman referring to the vaccine programme, the securing of PPE, or the fact that we came out of covid faster than any other European country?

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): A comment from the Sue Gray report that sickened me was:

“I was made aware of multiple examples of a lack of respect and poor treatment of security and cleaning staff.”

The Prime Minister has made a public apology at the Dispatch Box, but when will he personally apologise to those hard-working cleaning staff, who took a risk every day to keep everyone else safe?

The Prime Minister: To repeat what I said both earlier and to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), when I have identified the custodians, cleaners and staff in question, I will of course talk to them myself.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): One address, 20 months, 204 questionnaires, 345 documents and 510 photos—including the ones on page 38 onwards of the Prime Minister raising a toast when he should be toast—and as a result 126 fines, mostly given to 83 junior staffers, all while the police were routinely fining people greater amounts than the £50 the Prime Minister was fined, and for far lesser offences. Does this not all point to the conclusion that not everyone is as equal under the law as each other these days?

The Prime Minister: I think there is a criticism of the Metropolitan police contained in what the hon. Lady just said, which I do not agree with.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The problem with the report is that the dates that are outlined so clearly reopen many of our wounds. I am going to ask the Prime Minister the question that the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) asked earlier but the Prime Minister did not answer: when he met with Sue Gray recently, did he ask her not to publish the report?

The Prime Minister: No. What I can tell the hon. Lady is that the report is wholly independent and the judgments contained in it are a matter for Sue Gray. I am grateful to her for what she has done, and her interim report was extremely useful to the Government in making the changes that we have made.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): In the years to come, when the Prime Minister reflects on his time as PM and in government, what does he think will be his proudest moment? Will it be breaking his own lockdown laws and being fined? Will it be misleading Parliament? Or will it be lying to the Queen and presiding over such a toxic environment that, according to Sue Gray’s report, staff in his office had a lively party the night before her husband’s funeral?

The Prime Minister: I will look back, many years hence, on, from this period, the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, which was not half bad; being the first country anywhere in the world to put an approved vaccine in anybody’s arm; and coming out of covid faster than any other European country. Those are already very considerable achievements, to say nothing of delivering Brexit, which the hon. Lady would not have done and neither would the Labour party.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister was asked whether he thought any other Prime Minister would have allowed such rule breaking on

[Sarah Jones]

their watch. I was a senior civil servant for two Prime Ministers—Gordon Brown and the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—and I can tell the Prime Minister that when I was a senior civil servant no such behaviour would have occurred. What is clear to me in the Sue Gray report is the number of comments by civil servants who knew that they were doing something wrong. They said:

“we seem to have got away with”

it; this is

“somewhat of a comms risk”;

people should not be

“walking around waving bottles of wine”

in front of cameras—and it goes on. They knew they were doing something wrong; did the Prime Minister, at any stage and at any of the events he attended, think he was doing something wrong?

The Prime Minister: No, and I have tried to be clear with the House about that. By the way, the hon. Lady talks about serving previous Prime Ministers; I thank her for her service, but I want to assure her that I have never thrown a stapler at anybody, or an ashtray.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Prime Minister’s utterances on partygate at that Dispatch Box have proven to be the fantasy that we all knew they were. Allegra Stratton resigned for merely joking about a party; she has more integrity in her little finger than the Prime Minister could ever hope to possess. This charlatan of a Prime Minister is without shame, without credibility and without any hope of ever winning another election. Will he sacrifice anyone or any institution—including his own party—to try to keep his ever-weakening grip on power?

The Prime Minister: I know why the SNP wants to remove me from office: because we are going to get on and win the next election. That is the reality.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): Maybe the Prime Minister could help me, again. If no rules were broken, what on earth did Martin Reynolds mean when he said, “we...got away with” it? He was referring, of course, to the bring-your-own-booze party on 20 May. What did he mean by “we...got away with” it?

The Prime Minister: I cannot give an exegesis of what is in the report. The hon. Lady can read the report for herself.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): When the Prime Minister says he is sorry, we know he is sorry for getting caught. One of my constituents, Louise, was in hospital in November 2020. A very elderly woman lay in the bed next to hers, crying and begging for her family. She asked Louise to phone and ask them why they had not come to see her. The last thing she said to Louise was:

“I won’t be here in the morning.”

She died with a student nurse holding her hand; that haunts Louise to this day. Does the Prime Minister agree with Louise when she says that he is a liar and must resign?

The Prime Minister: I have every sympathy for Louise and all those who have suffered, but no, for the reasons I have given, I do not agree with what the hon. Gentleman has just said.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): The Prime Minister has presided over a culture of law breaking, entitlement and privilege in Downing Street. He cannot credibly plead ignorance on that point. In his statement, he sought to rationalise it by saying that the staff in Downing Street were working long, pressurised hours battling covid. What does he say to the thousands of doctors, nurses, care workers, emergency services workers, cleaners, security staff and, indeed, civil servants up and down the country who did not have alcohol-fuelled work events, parties or leaving dos?

The Prime Minister: I simply say to them what I have said since the pandemic began, which is that I thank them from the bottom of my heart.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): When previously I asked the Prime Minister to release the publicly funded photographs of these incidents, he declined because of the police investigation. Is there any conceivable reason why the full publicly funded catalogue of these incidents should not now be released so that the public can see and judge for themselves?

The Prime Minister: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that, to the best of my knowledge, all the evidence has been seen by Sue Gray and by the Metropolitan police. There may be issues about what else can be released more generally, but I believe that the hon. Gentleman and the public have a representative sample of the images.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): In a five-page statement, the Prime Minister indicated five times that he takes responsibility, but in fact he has not done so once. During the pandemic, all MPs asked our constituents to adhere to the guidelines to protect themselves, their families, their friends, their colleagues and the wider community. With the benefit of hindsight, does the Prime Minister believe he set a good example that he can look back on with pride?

The Prime Minister: Where I fell short and where we fell short, I apologise. I thank all colleagues who asked their constituents to follow the guidelines. Yes, the Government can be very proud of a lot of what we delivered during covid.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I have waited for the report and, having looked through it, it is clear to me that the Prime Minister did break the rules on one occasion, when he was surprised by a birthday greeting between meetings in the Cabinet Room. That was a clear rule breach, but one for which he has apologised, and I accept his apology. It is also clear from the report that there were other occasions on which the Prime Minister was not present and did not break the rules, but others did. Such events occurred repeatedly during the lockdown. What has the Prime Minister learned from the report? How will the changes he has put in place in No. 10 ensure that such behaviours, and the attitudes that allowed them to occur, do not persist?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) asked substantially the same question. The lines of command and responsibility in No. 10 are now much sharper, thanks to the installation of a new second permanent secretary with direct responsibility for everybody in the building.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Prime Minister must see that people partying until the small hours on a regular basis at Downing Street paints an awful picture to everybody else who was following the rules. But I want to ask him specifically about the gathering in his flat on 13 November 2020, which, contrary to what he said today, has not been fully investigated by Sue Gray. Can he confirm for the record that everyone who was there that evening was working and that there was no alcohol, no music or anything else that people might reasonably conclude constituted a party?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I think I have answered that question already. I have nothing to add to what Sue Gray says in her report and what the Metropolitan police found in their investigation.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I know the Prime Minister would love these incidents to be swept under the carpet and us to forget about them. But the “Panorama” documentary and the Sue Gray report show the utterly inappropriate and shameless behaviour that took place at No.10 during lockdowns. The Prime Minister has said that he wanted to appreciate his officials at No.10. The way he did so was by having parties that took place every Friday at 4pm with an open bar and excessive drinking. The Sue Gray report states:

“The excessive consumption of alcohol is not appropriate in a professional workplace at any time.”

To take responsibility is to resign, which the Prime Minister says he will not do, but what is he doing to appreciate his staff and officials at No. 10 now?

The Prime Minister: What we are already doing is sharpening up the management of No.10, making it easier for staff to complain and to voice their anxieties. We have to get on with the business of government; I know that the hon. Lady wants to persist with this subject, but I want those officials to focus on the priorities of the people.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is rumoured that the Chancellor will shortly—finally—be announcing some further help for our constituents who are struggling with the cost of living crisis, but we know how things work in this Government with their enormous team of spin doctors. Have the Prime Minister’s Government deliberately held back the details of that desperately needed help in order to provide some cover for the damning impact of this report?

The Prime Minister: No, Mr Speaker.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I, like many in this country, have lost loved ones. My constituents have lost loved ones. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost loved ones. The longer that this goes on the more traumatising their experience is. I can tell the Prime Minister that sitting through this statement is

very traumatising for many of us who have lost loved ones and our constituents. We cannot go on like this. Will the Prime Minister now do the decent thing—the honourable thing—accept responsibility and step down so that we can all move on and get on with our lives and ensure that people who have suffered so much are protected and served properly?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady. Of course I appreciate the suffering of those on whose behalf she speaks, but I do believe that it is the duty of the Government to get on as fast as we can with sorting out the priorities of the people now.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank Sue Gray for the publication of her report. It is good to see the final article. We all recognise that there are many lessons to be learned from the handling of the pandemic for all levels of government, as the report states. Can the Prime Minister, working alongside devolved Administrations, give an indication as to when he will be launching the public inquiry on covid-19 that he promised? The general public have questions to ask, and answers must be given. When will the general public have their say?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, Baroness Hallett—Heather Hallett—has been appointed to head the inquiry, and he can expect developments soon.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is absolutely imperative that the British public are told the whole truth. Everyone hopes that there have been no redactions or changes to the report. Indeed, Downing Street said that its intention was to publish the report in full, in its entirety, unchanged. Did anyone in No.10 receive a copy of the report yesterday, and were any requests made for sections to be removed or altered? Were any changes made, following requests, to the section relating to the gathering in the No.10 flat on 13 November 2020?

The Prime Minister: I received the report—I had not seen it before— shortly after 10 o’clock this morning. On the hon. Gentleman’s second point about the events on 13 November, I have addressed those several times.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): We now know that, while the Prime Minister was happy to let the bodies pile high outside Downing Street, he was also happy to let the bottles pile up high inside Downing Street. We also know that he has come to that Dispatch Box and denied point blank that events took place—events that we now know did take place—that turned Downing Street into the most notorious party flat in central London. The Prime Minister has diminished and demeaned his office. He speaks of leadership, but any leader should know when it is time to go. Why will the Prime Minister not go, so that the country can move on as it needs to, without him in office?

The Prime Minister: What the hon. Gentleman has just said of the civil servants—some of whom, I am sad to say, were fined—who worked night and day to minimise suffering and minimise casualties during covid is unworthy.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): My constituent Ruby Fuller lived by the motto, “Live kindly, live loudly” in pursuit of social justice. Ruby died from cancer on 20 May 2020 as the “bring your

[Helen Hayes]

own booze” party was happening in Downing Street. Her grandparents and her young friends had to say goodbye to Ruby by Zoom. What does the Prime Minister have to say to Ruby’s friends—young people in my constituency who are listening to him today blaming everybody but himself? When will he accept that every single day that he remains in Downing Street our politics is corroded further?

The Prime Minister: I repeat my condolences to those who suffered from covid, to those who could not get the treatment that they needed during the pandemic, and to the family of Ruby who could not see her when she was suffering from cancer. All I can say now is that we want to get on with our work, which is to clear the backlogs, particularly for cancer patients up and down the country.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): For the bereaved families of covid, this report will unleash another cruel wave of loss, grief and anger. As a bare minimum, will the Prime Minister promise that the interim findings of the covid inquiry will be published before the next general election?

The Prime Minister: That is a matter for the chair.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): To those MPs who have clearly gone for their lunch, may I advise them that the Prime Minister’s humble pie is off? Was the Prime Minister at the party on 18 December 2020—the so-called wine and cheese evening that lasted for five hours, where red wine was “spilled on one wall”, it was “crowded and noisy”, and a cleaner was forced to clean up afterwards. Was he at it, at any stage of the proceedings?

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman will find the answer to that question in Sue Gray’s report.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The conclusion of the report states that Ms Gray found that

“some staff had witnessed and been subjected to behaviours at work”—

that were concerning, and that there were—

“...multiple examples of a lack of respect and poor treatment of security and cleaning staff.”

For me, that is the most damning and also the most telling part of the report. Why is it that people like the Prime Minister and the people who work at No.10 think that cleaners, security guards, nurses and teachers are beneath them and less important than them?

The Prime Minister: I condemn such behaviour. When I was running London transport, for instance, I instituted much tougher penalties for those who abused our staff. I support tougher penalties for those who abuse shopworkers. Those are the values that I stand for.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): “Wine Time Friday”, karaoke, grown men drinking shots of apple sours—how can anyone on the Government Benches honestly describe these as work events? Misleading the House is a very serious issue, as the Prime Minister well knows, but taking the people of this country for fools is far worse. While he is busy trying to defend the indefensible,

I would like to know how many of my former colleagues he thinks will be joining me on the Opposition Benches after today?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will find the answers to his questions in the Sue Gray report. I really do not have anything more to add.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): By the actions of this Prime Minister, standards of public life in the UK now lie face down in the gutter. The Prime Minister wants us all to move on, collectively. Well, let me assure this derailed Prime Minister, there is no collective in Scotland of which he is a part. As his authority lies festering in a steaming pile of incredulity, will he set out to the people of Scotland the productive and positive role he will play with the Scottish Government in allowing and enacting a referendum on independence, so that we can finally free ourselves of exactly the type of behaviour he typifies?

The Prime Minister: I will continue to work productively with the Government in Scotland, as we did throughout the pandemic, not least in delivering the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, the furlough programme and everything else that we did together, which shows that we are stronger together.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In response to the question put by my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), the Prime Minister said that he had not had time to apologise to the cleaning and security staff. Is he telling this House that Sue Gray and no official apprised him of one of the eight conclusions of this report prior to his coming to the House today—or are those staff just not his priority?

The Prime Minister: No, since I saw the report this morning I have not had time to identify the custodians or cleaners in question, but as I told her hon. Friend, as soon as I can, I will apologise to them in person.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am inordinately proud of the way my constituents and people up and down this country have dealt not just with the pandemic but with the economic crisis that they now face. None of that is reflected in the shameful behaviour we see set out in the report. Earlier—much earlier—I saw the Prime Minister look at his watch, and one of his colleagues suggested that perhaps we should want to turn the page on what has happened. Believe me, I think everyone in this place would like to turn the page and never have to revisit it, but the only way we can do that is if the Prime Minister accepts responsibility fully and moves on, so we can turn that page.

The Prime Minister: I am going to move on with the Government’s agenda, and that is exactly what we are going to do.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I appreciate that the Prime Minister struggles with the truth, but can he vouch to me and to this House that he will do everything he possibly can to stave off his Back Benchers and instead lead the campaign to protect his precious Union?

The Prime Minister: Increasingly, the strongest advocates of the Union and the United Kingdom are the Scottish nationalist party. By their incompetence, their overtaking, their poor educational results—they cannot even make the trains run on time, or buy some ferries without totally screwing it up—they are terrific advocates of the United Kingdom. I thank them for what they are doing.

BILL PRESENTED

GENETIC TECHNOLOGY (PRECISION BREEDING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary George Eustice, supported by the Prime Minister, Steve Barclay, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Sajid Javid, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng and Jo Churchill, presented a Bill to make provision about the release and marketing of, and risk assessments relating to, precision-bred plants and animals, and the marketing of food and feed produced from such plants and animals; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 11) with explanatory notes (Bill 11-EN).

PRODUCT SECURITY AND TELECOMMUNICATIONS INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 26 January 2022 in the last Session of Parliament (Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill (Programme)) be varied as follows:

- (1) Paragraphs (4) and (5) of the Order shall be omitted.
- (2) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.
- (3) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.—(*David T. C. Davies.*)

Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

New Clause 1

PERSONS ABLE TO CONFER CODE RIGHTS ON OPERATORS IN EXCLUSIVE OCCUPATION

“(1) The electronic communications code is amended as follows.

(2) In paragraph 9 (persons who may confer code rights)—

- (a) the existing wording becomes sub-paragraph (1);
- (b) after that sub-paragraph insert—

‘(2) But where land is occupied exclusively by an operator, a code right in respect of the land may be conferred on the operator by an agreement between the operator and—

- (a) any person other than the operator who for the time being exercises powers of management or control over the land, or
- (b) if there is no person within paragraph (a), any person other than the operator whose interest in the land would be prejudicially affected by the exercise of the code right.’

(3) In paragraph 10 (persons bound by code rights), in sub-paragraph (1), omit the words from ‘who’ to the end.”—(*Julia Lopez.*)

This new clause ensures that an operator in exclusive occupation of land may apply to a person mentioned in new paragraph 9(2)(a) or (b) of the electronic communications code for code rights in respect of the land.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.5 pm

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government new clause 2—*Jurisdiction of First-tier Tribunal in relation to code proceedings in Wales.*

Government amendments 1 to 3.

Amendment 14, in clause 59, page 42, line 11, after “agreement”, insert
“other than with a private landlord”.

This amendment, together with Amendments 15, 16 and 17, would apply a different regime under the Electronic Communications Code to private landlords, giving automatic upgrade rights for operators to properties owned by private landlords subject to the condition that the upgrading imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.

Amendment 15, page 43, line 39, at end insert—

“(5B) Paragraph 17 of the new code (power for operator to upgrade or share apparatus) applies in relation to an operator who is a party to a subsisting agreement with a private landlord, but as if for sub-paragraphs (1) to (6) there were substituted—

‘(1) This paragraph applies where—

- (a) an operator (“the main operator”) keeps electronic communications apparatus installed on, under or over land, and
- (b) the main operator is a party to a subsisting agreement in relation to the electronic communications apparatus.

(2) If the conditions in sub-paragraphs (3), (4) and (6) are met, the main operator may—

- (a) upgrade the electronic communications apparatus, or
- (b) share the use of the electronic communications apparatus with another operator.
- (3) The first condition is that any changes as a result of the upgrading or sharing to the electronic communications apparatus to which the agreement relates have no adverse impact, or no more than a minimal adverse impact, on its appearance.
- (4) The second condition is that the upgrading or sharing imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.
- (5) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (4) a burden includes anything that—
 - (a) has an adverse effect on the person's enjoyment of the land, or
 - (b) causes loss, damage or expense to the person.
- (6) The third condition is that, before the beginning of the period of 21 days ending with the day on which the main operator begins to upgrade the electronic communications apparatus or (as the case may be) share its use, the main operator attaches a notice, in a secure and durable manner, to a conspicuous object on the relevant land.
- (7) A notice attached for the purposes of sub-paragraph (6) must—
 - (a) be attached in a position where it is reasonably legible,
 - (b) state that the main operator intends to upgrade the electronic communications apparatus or (as the case may be) share its use with another operator,
 - (c) state the date on which the main operator intends to begin to upgrade the electronic communications apparatus or (as the case may be) share its use with another operator,
 - (d) state, in a case where the main operator intends to share the use of the electronic communications apparatus with another operator, the name of the other operator, and
 - (e) give the name of the main operator and an address in the United Kingdom at which the main operator may be contacted about the upgrading or sharing.
- (8) Any person giving a notice at that address in respect of that electronic communications apparatus is to be treated as having been given that address for the purposes of paragraph 91(2).
- (9) Any agreement under Part 2 of this code is void to the extent that—
 - (a) it prevents or limits the upgrading or sharing, in a case where the conditions mentioned in sub-paragraphs (3), (4) and (6) are met, of any electronic communications apparatus to which the agreement relates that is installed on, over or under land, or
 - (b) it makes upgrading or sharing of such electronic communications apparatus subject to conditions to be met by the operator (including a condition requiring the payment of money).
- (10) Nothing in this paragraph is to be read as conferring a right on the main operator to enter the land which the main operator would not otherwise have, when upgrading or sharing the use of the electronic communications apparatus.
- (11) References in this paragraph to sharing electronic communications apparatus include carrying out works to the electronic communications apparatus to enable such sharing to take place.
- (12) In this paragraph—
 - “the relevant land” means—
 - (a) in a case where the main operator has a right to enter the land, that land;

- (b) in any other case, the land on which works will be carried out to enable the upgrading or sharing to take place or, where there is more than one set of works, the land on which each set of works will be carried out;

“subsisting agreement” has the meaning given by paragraph 1(4) of Schedule 2 to the Digital Economy Act 2017.”

This amendment, together with Amendments 14, 16 and 17, would apply a different regime under the Electronic Communications Code to private landlords, giving automatic upgrade rights for operators to properties owned by private landlords subject to the condition that the upgrading imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.

Amendment 16, in clause 60, page 44, line 4, after “land”, insert

“not owned by a private landlord”.

This amendment, together with Amendments 14, 15 and 17, would apply a different regime under the Electronic Communications Code to private landlords, giving automatic upgrade rights for operators to properties owned by private landlords subject to the condition that the upgrading imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.

Amendment 17, page 45, line 14, at end insert—

“17B (1) This paragraph applies where—

- (a) an operator (‘the main operator’) keeps electronic communications apparatus installed on, under or over land owned by a private landlord,
- (b) the main operator is not a party to an agreement under Part 2 of this code in relation to the electronic communications apparatus, and
- (c) the electronic communications apparatus was installed before 29 December 2003.

(2) If the conditions in sub-paragraphs (3), (4) and (6) are met, the main operator may—

- (a) upgrade the electronic communications apparatus, or
- (b) share the use of the electronic communications apparatus with another operator.

(3) The first condition is that any changes as a result of the upgrading or sharing to the electronic communications apparatus to which any existing agreement between the operator and the landlord relates have no adverse impact, or no more than a minimal adverse impact, on its appearance.

(4) The second condition is that the upgrading or sharing imposes no additional burden on the landlord.

(5) For the purposes of sub-paragraph (4) a burden includes anything that—

- (a) has an adverse effect on the person's enjoyment of the land, or
- (b) causes loss, damage or expense to the person.

(6) The third condition is that, before the beginning of the period of 21 days ending with the day on which the main operator begins to upgrade the electronic communications apparatus or (as the case may be) share its use, the main operator attaches a notice, in a secure and durable manner, to a conspicuous object on the relevant land.

(7) A notice attached for the purposes of sub-paragraph (6) must—

- (a) be attached in a position where it is reasonably legible,
- (b) state that the main operator intends to upgrade the electronic communications apparatus or (as the case may be) share its use with another operator,
- (c) state the date on which the main operator intends to begin to upgrade the electronic communications apparatus or (as the case may be) share its use with another operator,
- (d) state, in a case where the main operator intends to share the use of the electronic communications apparatus with another operator, the name of the other operator, and

- (e) give the name of the main operator and an address in the United Kingdom at which the main operator may be contacted about the upgrading or sharing.

(8) Any person giving a notice at that address in respect of that electronic communications apparatus is to be treated as having been given that address for the purposes of paragraph 91(2).

(9) Nothing in this paragraph is to be read as conferring a right on the main operator to enter the land which the main operator would not otherwise have, when upgrading or sharing the use of the electronic communications apparatus.

(10) References in this paragraph to sharing electronic communications apparatus include carrying out works to the electronic communications apparatus to enable such sharing to take place.

(11) In this paragraph ‘the relevant land’ means—

- (a) in a case where the main operator has a right to enter the land, that land;
- (b) in any other case, the land on which works will be carried out to enable the upgrading or sharing to take place or, where there is more than one set of works, the land on which each set of works will be carried out.”

This amendment, together with Amendments 14, 15 and 16, would apply a different regime under the Electronic Communications Code to private landlords, giving automatic upgrade rights for operators to properties owned by private landlords subject to the condition that the upgrading imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.

Amendment 12, page 45, line 18, leave out clause 61.

This amendment removes clause 61 of the Bill, which gives operators the ability to calculate rent based on ‘land value’ rather than ‘market value’ when renewing tenancies to host digital infrastructure on private land.

Amendment 13, page 46, line 42, leave out clause 62.

This amendment removes clause 62 of the Bill, which gives operators the ability to calculate rent based on ‘land value’ rather than ‘market value’ when renewing tenancies to host digital infrastructure on private land in Northern Ireland.

Amendment 9, in clause 68, page 58, line 38, leave out from “must” to “one” in line 39 and insert “use”.

This amendment, along with Amendments 10 and 11, seeks to ensure that operators engage in the alternative dispute resolution process by making it mandatory.

Government amendments 4 to 7.

Amendment 10, in clause 68, page 59, line 12, leave out from “must” to “one” in line 13 and insert “use”.

This amendment, along with Amendments 9 and 11, seeks to ensure that operators engage in the alternative dispute resolution process by making it mandatory.

Amendment 11, page 59, line 34, leave out from “must” to “one” in line 35 and insert “use”.

This amendment, along with Amendments 9 and 10, seeks to ensure that operators engage in the alternative dispute resolution process by making it mandatory.

Government amendment 8.

Julia Lopez: It is a pleasure to be making such good progress on this Bill, which seeks to deliver world-class connectivity to our constituents and to improve the security of the devices that we all rely on. I will start by explaining the need for the Government amendments tabled in the name of the Secretary of State, as those amendments are relatively straightforward. I will then move on to the more substantial matter of the remaining amendments, which I suspect right hon. and hon. Members are keener to discuss.

Beginning with new clause 1, as I explained on Second Reading, some operators with apparatus on land are currently unable to follow an existing statutory process to renew their agreement once it comes to an end. These operators also cannot use the code to get an entirely new agreement, because only the occupier of land can grant code rights. An operator already occupying land clearly cannot enter into an agreement with itself. Clause 57 was intended to ensure that operators could obtain code rights from another party in these circumstances, but subsequent engagement with stakeholders has made it clear that the clause as drafted would not cover all scenarios and that a more focused approach is required. Some operators would still find themselves effectively stuck once their agreements ended, with no means of renewing their agreement and no reasonable or practical means of obtaining a new code agreement. This can have negative consequences for consumers, and as such it is unacceptable. New clause 1 therefore replaces clause 57.

The new clause will ensure that all operators in exclusive occupation of land who do not have a statutory renewal option can still seek a code agreement. The person who can grant those code rights will usually be the owner of the land, although the new drafting makes provision for less straightforward situations. As well as resolving the problem of “stuck” operators, new clause 1 also assists operators with an existing, ongoing agreement. Where such operators need additional code rights that are not already provided by their current agreement, the new clause ensures they can seek such rights. Currently, some such operators are unable to do so because they are in occupation of the land.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that operators still need to get the agreement of the landowner or someone else who is empowered to grant that right, so that there is no muddle or confusion?

Julia Lopez: Yes. They will be allowed to take out a new agreements, but they still have to be under the existing regime.

To be clear, this will not let an operator unilaterally change, or ask the court to impose a change to, the terms or duration of their current agreement. It allows an additional code right to be conferred on the operator via a new, separate code agreement.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I think we all accept the need to be able to protect continuity of service, but my constituent, Mr Ramsay, is on the receiving end of some very strong tactics by Telefonica, which is looking to reduce the value of his lease agreement by about 90%, by £5,000 from about £7,000. What does the Minister suggest my constituent do under the weight of that corporate might? It is a David and Goliath situation.

Julia Lopez: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the case of his constituent. I would be grateful if he took it up with my officials, as I am keen to look into it. Throughout the passage of the Bill, individuals have raised cases with me. It is fair to say that the number of cases has declined substantially as the Bill has progressed through the House, so I am content that the position is getting much better, but if there are outstanding cases of situations that any MP feels is unfair, I will be grateful if they are brought to my attention.

[Julia Lopez]

To return to the case I was making for new clause 1, as with an initial agreement, if a consensual agreement cannot be reached about the additional right needed, operators will be able to ask the court to impose an additional agreement conferring the additional right. Of course, in those circumstances an operator would still have to satisfy the court that its application meets the requirements of part 4 of the code, including the public interest test.

Let me give an example of how the Government intend this to work. An operator may have an existing agreement which contains a code right to install a 3 metre high mast. Subsequently, the operator realises that it needs to install a 5-metre high mast on the same piece of land. That could enable the operator to install 5G technology or to improve or expand its network. The original agreement allowing the 3-metre mast will continue to run for its remaining term, and the operator will ask the site provider to enter into a second agreement, which contains a code right allowing it to install the 5-metre high mast.

Advances in technology occur at pace, whereas a code agreement can last for a number of years. If an operator has to wait until the term of its code agreement is about to expire before being able to obtain additional code rights, it will be unable to install the latest technology on its apparatus, meaning our constituents will be deprived of faster, more reliable services such as 5G and, in time, 6G. We think that the new clause is also vital to give UK businesses access to the technology they need, enabling our economy to thrive. I hope Members will therefore agree that it must be made.

Turning to new clause 2, we want to ensure that disputes relating to the electronic communications code can be dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible. Currently, paragraph 95 of the code allows the Secretary of State to make regulations that confer jurisdiction on either the first-tier tribunal or upper tribunal in relation to England, but only the upper tribunal in relation to Wales. The current regulations made under paragraph 95 state that all code disputes must commence in the upper tribunal, although in England, appropriate cases may then be handed down to the first-tier tribunal. The first-tier tribunal has greater administrative resources and more judges than the upper tribunal, meaning that code disputes can be processed and heard more quickly.

Moving forward, the Government are therefore considering a greater role for the first-tier tribunal in hearing code disputes, including making further regulations using the power in paragraph 95 of the code where appropriate. The new clause provides the necessary powers so that we can do just that. In future, the Secretary of State will be able to make regulations conferring jurisdiction on both the upper tribunal and the first-tier tribunal in Wales.

The final set of Government amendments is amendments 4 to 7. They have been tabled to make a minor clarification to the text of clause 68 to avoid any unintended interpretation of the legislation. Clause 68 currently makes it clear that an operator can, at any time, give notice in writing to a person from whom they are seeking code rights, stating that the operator wishes to engage in alternative dispute resolution, often known as ADR. However, nowhere is it set out that such a notice

can be sent from that person to the operator. The amendments clarify that when an operator seeks code rights from a person, either the operator or that person may give notice to the other expressing a wish to engage in ADR at any time.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I certainly welcome the movement that the Minister has made. I went to table exactly those amendments and was pleased to find that she had beaten me to it. Can I tempt her to go further with respect to my amendment and amendment 4 and require the operator, which has such disproportionate power against the landowner, to engage as a requirement in the alternative dispute procedure from the outset?

Julia Lopez: I am afraid that my right hon. Friend cannot tempt me, and I will say why shortly.

I thank the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) for bringing forward amendments 14 to 17 to clauses 59 and 60. They would expand retrospective rights to upgrade and share apparatus in buildings owned by private landlords, such as blocks of flats, also known as multiple dwelling units or MDUs. I begin by saying that I have considered this issue carefully. I have been lobbied extremely heavily on it by one operator in particular, and I have tested the proposition with my officials, legal advisers and other operators.

I would not like to pre-empt what the hon. Lady might say as to why she tabled the amendments and their perceived need. However, I reassure her, and any others considering supporting them, that as a fellow London MP with many MDUs in my seat I am concerned about the dangers of a digital divide emerging, and I am doing what I can to avoid that circumstance. If I thought that the amendments genuinely helped on that front, I would do all I could to incorporate them, but there is a glaring lack of consensus among the telecoms industry about their need. Indeed, only one operator has contacted me in support of them, while four separate operators and representative bodies have strongly opposed the amendments, arguing that they are anti-competitive. I will talk a little more about that in a minute.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I welcome the Minister's rejection of those amendments. In my area, we have KCOM, which is a strong local performer. Had it not been for KCOM, most of my constituents, who are on the dual network, where it can be KCOM or Openreach, would not be anywhere near to getting gigabit broadband. We therefore do not want to see any changes that will give BT Openreach an advantage or preference over other providers, such as KCOM, which have got their acts together and got gigabit broadband delivered to our homes.

2.15 pm

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the great work of KCOM and the importance of competition and how it is driving roll-out. It is changing the dynamic in the market, very much for the better. I am mindful of how we drive extra competitiveness in this field, because that is what is getting us the roll-out and the digital connectivity that our constituents need and demand.

Amendments 14 to 17 are, I think, identical to the proposals tabled in Committee. As I explained then, upgrading and sharing electronic communications

apparatus offers substantial benefits. We specifically recognised that in our 2017 reforms and in the new upgrading and sharing rights that clauses 59 and 60 will create. However, as I also explained, any legislation concerning work affecting private land has to take careful care to strike the right balance between public benefit and individual rights. The automatic rights introduced in 2017 were developed to maintain that balance.

Even more careful consideration is needed for legislation that applies retrospectively. It is for that reason that clauses 59 and 60, which have retrospective effect, include tighter restrictions on the rights they confer on operators. Under those clauses, operators will have automatic rights to carry out only limited activities that will not have adverse impacts on the land in question or impose any burden on anyone with an interest in the land. However, conferring these rights will facilitate activities such as crucial upgrading work on cables installed underneath land. Industry stakeholders have confirmed that this has significant potential to provide homes and communities with gigabit-capable connections at pace. The public benefits are therefore substantial, with little to no impact on private individuals.

Further expanding these retrospective measures, as proposed by the amendments, would require us to revisit two fundamental points: first, what would the public benefit be, and, secondly, what would the impact be on individual landowners' rights? We have considered that carefully, and we do not think that the case has been made for the changes that the amendments propose.

Looking first at the impact on landowners' rights, if apparatus can be upgraded or shared without material alteration to land or property—for example, if works are carried out solely on or within apparatus, such as a duct—impact on the land can be negligible. Upgrading equipment in a building almost always involves some direct impact, however small, on the building. We think that works that have an impact on property should require either agreement from the landlord or imposition by the courts through the processes provided for in the code.

In any event, if an automatic right of the kind envisaged was introduced, operators would still have to successfully engage with the landlords for logistical purposes, such as to arrange access to the property or to discuss any potential health and safety issues or need for repairs. If these conversations must take place, and we think that they should, it seems sensible that the operator should at the same time ask permission to carry out the works. That brings us again to the question of whether the expanded automatic rights, as proposed by the amendments, would be proportionate. There are other ways that operators can upgrade equipment in multi-dwelling units. They can already ask for the rights to do so, and measures are being introduced that will enable them to resolve matters quickly and cheaply.

Finally, what of the public benefit? Members made the point in Committee that residents in blocks of flats urgently need gigabit-capable connections, particularly if we are to meet our levelling-up ambitions in urban areas, as well as in rural communities. I have explained that the code already contains provisions that would enable operators to seek rights to upgrade apparatus in buildings. In contrast, an automatic right could have adverse impacts that have perhaps not been fully explored. Members suggest that there is consensus in industry

that these changes are needed, but that is not the case. I have received direct representations from many fibre providers that strongly oppose these proposals. They say that the proposals would create an unfair advantage for operators with equipment inside buildings, with potentially anti-competitive effects.

I hope that gives the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch assurance that the provisions in the Bill on retrospective rights to upgrade and share represent a balanced approach, and that there are substantial measures in place and under way to connect residents of multi-dwelling units. I therefore hope that she will not press her amendments to a Division.

Finally, I will address the amendments tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). First, amendments 12 and 13 seek to remove clauses 61 and 62 from the Bill. This is another matter that I am familiar with. Indeed, as I suggested in response to an intervention, I have had conversations with him and other hon. Members about particular cases, as well as with the campaign group that represents landowners on the issue.

The Government recognise that, since 2017, there have been problems between some landowners and telecoms operators, and a level of discontent about the result of the valuation regime change, but we want to bring that regime more in line with that of other utilities, and we believe there are significant benefits to doing so. I must say that I have found little evidence in recent weeks and months to suggest that the regime requires a radical overhaul.

I have encouraged more collaborative discussions between operators and landowners. I have looked into specific cases, and concluded that the measures that we are introducing to encourage more collaborative negotiations will help to tackle many of the problems that I have seen. Significant information about cases has not always been forthcoming when asked for, but if hon. Members would like to discuss constituency cases, I am always happy to receive the details. Fundamentally, we need a legislative framework that keeps costs low, so that we can encourage investment and protect consumers from price increases. The code valuation framework to calculate the sums payable to landowners by operators, which was introduced in 2017, aimed to achieve that. We maintain that the overall framework creates the right balance between the public need for fantastic digital infrastructure and making sure that landowners receive a fair payment for allowing their land to be used. The purpose of clauses 61 and 62 is to make sure that the valuation framework applies consistently across the UK and to all agreements the code applies to.

John Redwood: I certainly support the Minister in the belief that the more competitive the industry, the better the results that we will get. Has she had representations from people who would like to enter the market about whether the change would make them more likely to do so?

Julia Lopez: Most of the people I have spoken to are already in the market and believe that the change will make a big difference to how they roll out. It is a very competitive market with many new entrants. I am not aware of anybody who is just dipping their toe in the water; because it is so competitive, people are already aggressively in the market. We think that the change

[Julia Lopez]

will really help to accelerate the roll-out to our constituents of fantastic digital infrastructure of the kind that we all understand is fundamental to driving productivity gains, and to reducing the divide between areas that do and do not have that connectivity.

From the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West on Second Reading, I understand that his concern relates to the effect of clauses 61 and 62 on landowners who already host telecoms apparatus on their land. I recognise that, ultimately, these changes are likely to lead to reductions in the rent received by landowners with a tenancy protected by the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954 or the Business Tenancies (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. I appreciate that that might not have been expected by those entering into such tenancies at the time they were created, but it is also fair to say that market values change over time, and there is never any guarantee that rents received by a landlord will remain constant or increase.

We have also given careful consideration to the effect of clauses 61 and 62, and have balanced the impact that they might have on landowners with the wider, substantial public benefits that we are pursuing. It is also important to recognise that the changes will not happen until any ongoing agreement expires and comes to be renewed. Furthermore, clauses 63 and 64 introduce separate provisions allowing the landowner to recover compensation for any damage to their land, reduction in its value or reasonable expenses resulting from an operator exercising their code rights.

Clauses 61 to 64 ensure that the 2017 framework will apply to all future agreements. It must be remembered that the code has an underlying purpose, which is to support the delivery of robust digital networks. Our constituents increasingly rely on those networks for critical digital services. Only recently, the National Farmers Union's digital technology survey found that poor mobile signal and unreliable internet access are hampering farming businesses. We know that rural connectivity is a problem for many organisations, and addressing it is one of our priorities as a Government. The Bill, including clauses 61 and 62, aims to address those issues.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend had only noble intentions when tabling his amendments, but although they may benefit some landowners, they have the potential to penalise entire communities by keeping network costs unacceptably high. Clauses 61 and 62 will help to reduce the digital divide between different parts of the country, as they will help to prevent deployment being cheaper in one area than another.

Finally, I turn to amendments 9 to 11 tabled by my right hon. Friend, which would require a party to use alternative dispute resolution processes before making certain applications to a court under the electronic communications code, including where an agreement granting rights under the code is being sought. The provisions on ADR processes in the Bill aim to create more collaborative discussions between landowners and telecoms operators to ensure that litigation is used only as a last resort. I suspect that that is what the amendments seek to ensure as well. Although I sympathise with the intention behind these amendments, the Government oppose them—first, because they are unnecessary; secondly,

because ADR is not appropriate in every situation; and thirdly, because they would be counterproductive to the amendments' overall intentions.

The Bill requires operators, when requesting rights under the code, to inform the landowners of the availability of ADR. Crucially, it also creates a requirement that if an application is made to a court, the court will be required to take into account any unreasonable refusal to engage in ADR when awarding costs. Those requirements strongly incentivise the use of ADR without the need to make it mandatory. The Government therefore believe the amendments to be unnecessary.

It is also important to note that ADR may not be suitable in certain cases, such as where a disagreement is based on differing interpretations of the law. Such points of law must be resolved in the courts, and mandatory ADR would add cost and time to that process without offering any benefit.

The Government also believe that the amendments would be counterproductive to their own goals. If ADR were compulsory, some parties would be compelled to participate in an ADR process they do not want to be involved in, and so would be less inclined to actively engage in the process. That would increase the risk that ADR would fail, which would mean that parties would have to go to court anyway. If that were the case, all that compulsory ADR would have achieved is to add an additional layer of time and costs for landowners, such as charities, sports clubs and farmers. It should also be noted that, when consulted, a clear majority of stakeholders were not in favour of compulsory ADR. I hope that I have given my right hon. Friend assurance that the provisions regarding ADR in the Bill already represent the most effective way of encouraging its use, and I hope that he will not press his amendments to a Division.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): You will be aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I have spent at least the last five and a half years as an Opposition Whip encouraging brevity, so I do not intend to keep the House too long. I will keep my remarks short and hopefully to the point. As I said on Second Reading and in Committee, I will not pretend that the Opposition do not support the wider principles of the Bill. I thank the Minister for the constructive way in which she has engaged on it with me from the outset.

I turn to the new clauses and amendments. New clause 1 is an improvement on the Government's first attempt to change the definition of "occupier", but the changes put forward are still not watertight when it comes to preventing unintended consequences. The new clause does not address the underlying issue that operators could theoretically use it in situations other than when existing agreements have expired, which could lead to financial consequences for small site providers who have been hard done by since the electronic communications code review in 2017. More work is needed when the Bill moves to the other place to ensure it does not unintentionally punish site providers further. We have no issue with the proposal in new clause 2 that grants the Secretary of State power to make regulations that provide for a function conferred by the code on the court to be exercisable in relation to Wales by the first-tier tribunal.

I will speak to amendment 14 on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier). She sends her apologies to the

House; she is chairing the Public Accounts Committee. We have checked with the Clerks and the Speaker's Office to check that that is appropriate. That amendment, and the consequential amendments 15, 16 and 17, seek to apply a different regime under the electronic communications code to private landlords. They would give operators automatic upgrade rights in respect of properties owned by private landlords, subject to the strict condition that the upgrading imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.

The growing digital divide in our towns and cities has only been exacerbated by the pandemic. The Government's broadband target has been downgraded twice, and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee doubts that the current 85% gigabit target will be met. The backlog is due to the difficulty in accessing a high number of properties, a disproportionate number of which are flats, whose absentee landlords have little to no incentive to respond to requests to upgrade and improve connectivity.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I have complete sympathy with the intention behind the amendments and with what the hon. Gentleman is trying to do, but many providers whom we have spoken to throughout the Bill's passage oppose them on the grounds that they will give the incumbent provider an advantage. Is he concerned that an unintended consequence of his amendments might be to make it more difficult for new competitors to enter the market and provide our constituents with the services that they need?

Chris Elmore: I welcome competition in the market, but I would say to the hon. Lady that we now have broadband blackspots in parts of central London, and 15% of the constituency of the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Sally-Ann Hart) has these MDU blackspots. This is affecting constituents up and down the land, and the demand from all our constituencies, particularly because of the pandemic, is that we require the very best sector-leading broadband. It cannot simply be the case that some operators say this must happen and some say it should not happen, therefore nothing is resolved.

2.30 pm

The firm view of the official Opposition is that the Government are not taking this seriously enough, and we want the Government to meet their targets. They have broken their promises twice already, and we would like this country to have sector-leading broadband delivery right across the UK. I therefore say to the hon. Lady that it is remarkably straightforward: our constituents deserve better than what the Government are providing. For example, Openreach is unable to access 620,000 MDU properties. This includes 65,000 properties alone since December 2021. The Government can wax lyrical about levelling up our infrastructure, but the reality is that a significant chunk of the population are being left behind and excluded from the Government's fabled gigabit revolution.

I assure Members that amendments 14 to 17 would not give operators carte blanche to do as they want when they want. The strict conditions mean that automatic upgrade rights can be granted only if the sharing and upgrading of apparatus have no adverse effect on a

person's enjoyment of the land and there is no loss, damage or expense incurred for the person receiving the upgrade. This point was emphasised in Committee. The amendments will make the process easier for MDUs to have access to upgraded broadband connectivity, which I am sure Members on both sides of the House would like to see.

Amendments 12, 13 and 9, in the name of the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), look to amend the Bill by removing operators' ability to calculate the rent paid by landowners based on land value rather than market value. Prior to the 2017 reforms, the valuation of sites for digital infrastructure was carried out on a market value basis, and it functioned well. Landowners were paid a fair and competitive price for hosting telecommunications infrastructure. The 2017 ECC reforms changed the way new sites were valued. It stipulated that landowners would be paid on the basis of land value, not market value.

The Law Commission voiced clear concerns at the time, arguing that it would lead to a fall in rent for landowners, and therefore a slowdown in the number of agreements being reached. As we heard in oral evidence, some landowners have seen their rents dwindle by as much as 90% in some cases, and as a consequence livelihoods have been turned upside down. These are welcome amendments, as they would mean that small tenant farmers, sports clubs and community organisations get a fairer deal for the land they are renting out.

Sir Desmond Swayne: May I take it therefore that, if Madam Deputy Speaker is minded to allow separate decisions on my amendments, the hon. Gentleman will support them?

Chris Elmore: I can tell the right hon. Gentleman that we supported this in Committee. Sadly, the Members on his own side did not. I would be very glad if he pushed the amendments, through your good offices, Madam Deputy Speaker, and if he did so, I am sure we would all row in behind him. What the Minister and the Government Whips do could be a different conversation altogether, but I do not think that worries him anymore.

I now turn to Government amendments 4 to 7 and the right hon. Gentleman's own amendments 10 and 11. We welcome amendments 4 to 7 to ensure that a person with whom an operator is seeking a code agreement may at any time give the operator notice that they wish to engage in alternative dispute resolution in relation to a prospective site-sharing agreement. While the pace of new agreements between landowners and operators has slowed down in recent years, small landowners have been unable to afford the cost of going to a tribunal to try to defend their property rights. When the Bill moves to the other place, we hope that a debate can continue on the possibility of making ADR mandatory, as suggested by amendments 10 and 11, for telecoms operators before threatening to take landowners to court for an agreement to be imposed.

As I have said from the start and certainly many times in Committee, we are not against this Bill, which is a welcome step in the right direction. However, there are certain areas that need to be tightened and improved, and I hope their lordships will have a full debate and bring forward much-needed amendments to ensure that we deliver the very best broadband roll-out right across the United Kingdom.

Sir Desmond Swayne: My amendments 9 to 11 are designed to address what was made clear in the House on Second Reading, which is that there are examples of egregious bullying by the operators and that there is a complete disproportion of power between those operators and the landowners. The Minister has spoken of her demand for more collaborative working and collaborative negotiation, but we are asking for the process of alternative dispute resolution to be a requirement from the outset precisely because the operators know that they have the power to overawe and frighten landowners with the threat of legal action.

The purpose of my amendments 11 and 12, which was spelt out very well by the Minister, is to return to the status quo ante 2017. Until 2017, compensation was based on market value, and in 2017 the new code changed it to land value, notwithstanding the explicit advice of the Law Commission not to do so. As was entirely predictable and as was predicted, the market dried up as a consequence and there were far fewer agreements. One of the purposes of this Bill is of course to address that problem of the reduction in agreements. Therefore, the obvious remedy is to restore the position as it was and return to market value, but far from doing that—far from seizing this opportunity to remedy the situation—the Government are compounding their error by wanting to make agreements previously made under the old regime renewable under land value, actually making the problem significantly worse as a consequence.

I do not know why the Government appear to have adopted the anarchist principle that property is theft. On the contrary, these measures, by denying landowners proper compensation on the basis of market value—compensation arrived at by a free and open market—and coercing them accordingly to give up their property rights, strike me as theft. These provisions in the Bill are in effect a conspiracy to promote theft: it is stealing. I just cannot understand how a Conservative Government have brought themselves to bring this measure before the House, changing the law retrospectively and so damaging property rights. I just assume that Ministers simply have not realised the enormity of the change they are making. Accordingly, I believe these amendments are vitally necessary for the Bill.

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

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is worth saying from the start that this Bill certainly takes aim at some of the key gaps in how we regulate product security, so I am genuinely grateful that the Minister is seeking to address some of the issues that have been raised. I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson) for leading on Second Reading and in Committee, as well as for getting the phrase “malevolent toaster” into *Hansard*.

I have warned the Chamber a number of times about the various threats from technology and online spaces. For instance, I have campaigned for tougher action against so-called cyber-troops—organised malevolent forces that weaponise misinformation against our democracy. I definitely think that there has been major progress in building public awareness about the importance of cyber-security, and the experience of the botched Brexit referendum and Trump’s time in the White House was a crash course in taking online safety seriously.

However, we do remain a bit behind when it comes to the so-called internet of things, which encompasses the many household objects we now connect to the internet, from security systems to smart fridges and, indeed, toasters. This is a real Achilles heel. Last year, there was a total of 1.5 billion attacks on the internet of things—up 100% in the first half of the year. When Which? set up a fake smart home, it found that it was exposed to 12,000 attacks a week, yet our slowness in recognising that threat has got us to a place where only one in five “internet of things” manufacturers are believed to embed strong security in their devices.

Discussions around the Online Safety Bill have shown as clear as day that many companies, and especially those in the big tech sector, need to be dragged kicking and screaming to implement the bare minimum level of safety for users, whether that is to age-regulate graphic content or to stop scammers. Of course, there are some exceptions, but in any such situation where the private sector prioritises profit over protection, the Government need to step up to protect users with at least a bare minimum level of safety. The Government’s decision to do so by enshrining the principle of security design is therefore very welcome on the SNP Benches.

It is also absolutely right that we embed the idea in the law that the onus should be on the manufacturers to provide security in the design of their products, bringing the UK framework into line with the Scottish Government’s cyber-resilience strategy, which has enshrined security by design as a foundational principle in Scotland’s cyber-landscape. And yet, oversights abound. I am sad to say that oversights were raised with the Government on Second Reading and in Committee, but a number still remain. Some of that points to the Government trying to push the Bill through at breakneck speed, but the Minister should caw canny about putting speed over consumer safety as that will only cause us all headaches further down the line.

One such oversight on Second Reading was the requirement for manufacturers to declare publicly security flaws in their products without requiring that fixes are carried out when the flaw is announced. Nor is there a requirement for automatic fixes to be in place. One without the other essentially has the effect of drawing a big red circle around the product’s flaws for hackers without giving users the tools to shore up their defences. We cannot expect users to be skilled in product patching, so a laissez-faire approach would be a serious mistake. Nobody should be fixing those flaws but the manufacturers, and nobody but the Government can require them to do so.

On Second Reading, the Minister was urged to implement a requirement for automatic patching or one for manufacturers to have a solution in place by the time that the product flaws are disclosed publicly. It is frustrating that no progress has been made on that front. I hope that the Minister can see that that is an urgent issue for public safety and that we all have to get it right. There has also been no progress in plugging the gaps in products left out of the Bill’s scope such as internet-connected ovens, medical devices, routers and second-hand products. On top of that, the Government have justified the exclusion of laptops and desktops by arguing that there is already a developed security software market. That may be the case, but only 58% of people in the UK

use antivirus software. With home working on the rise, it is crucial that the Minister recognises the growing risk of laptops and desktops.

The somewhat unclear definition of “distributors” in the Bill also means that online marketplaces such as Amazon and eBay could argue that they are platforms or services, which would leave them outwith the Bill’s scope. That is a major oversight considering the number of unsafe products found on those sites. Closing that loophole would be a simple case of tidying up the language and explicitly including online marketplaces.

Although it is welcome that future regulations will require manufacturers to provide transparency on how their products receive security updates, leaving that up to the regulators feels like a bit of a cop-out. The Government have given no clarity on exactly what level of transparency will be required. Why not give us the details so that we can debate them fully in this place? Without those details, how can we expect enforcement to be in any way achievable?

Which? has been campaigning heavily on those two points, and I applaud its efforts to keep consumer protection at the top of the Government’s agenda. I urge the Minister to heed Tech UK’s call for the Government to undertake work to communicate the new framework to consumers. We risk causing a surge in electronic waste if the Bill causes consumers to perceive that their old devices are obsolete, so an effective comms strategy is needed to prevent an adverse environmental impact.

Before I wind up, I repeat the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire on the Bill’s enforcement mechanisms. Clause 26(5) makes it clear that the Secretary of State will not be able to bring proceedings in Scotland, but the Bill will still establish enforcement mechanisms and a body to carry out enforcement. As the Scottish courts and legal system will have to manage enforcement action brought in Scotland, and as oversight of the Scottish legal system is devolved, it is only right that the Scottish Government should have a role in developing the enforcement mechanism. That is honestly just a bit of tidying up, and it is a bit tiring to have to remind the Government constantly not to treat Scotland as an afterthought, but sadly we are here again. What consideration has been given to the Scottish Government’s call for the inclusion of a duty to consult relevant Scottish Ministers when developing the enforcement mechanism and the security requirements to be enforced? On the topic of the devolved nations, I would appreciate it if the Minister set out what impact the Bill’s passage will have on the Scottish Government’s power to regulate products in Scotland, particularly in the light of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020.

2.45 pm

The Bill is taking aim at many of the right problems in product security, and the SNP welcomes its aims in good faith, but the Minister is not returning that good faith, because she is simply ignoring some of the simple tweaks that we have asked for and suggested in order to close those loopholes and oversights. I hope that she will reconsider.

Andrew Percy: It is interesting to follow the comments of the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson), particularly on disinformation and

misinformation. If he wants to see some examples of excellent disinformation and misinformation, I refer him to some of the fake content that occasionally goes out from cybernats.

My only interest in this legislation is in what it will do for my constituents in Brigg and Goole. Some hon. Members might remember me banging on, many times in previous Parliaments and over the last few years, about the poor mobile and broadband coverage in my constituency. I used to refer to our broadband speed as two megabits a fortnight. I therefore welcome the general principles and direction of the Bill, which are so important to speeding up the roll-out of proper gigabit broadband.

In my intervention on the Minister, I highlighted my belief that it is competition that has delivered a massive increase in the roll-out of fibre-to-the-premise, gigabit-enabled broadband in my constituency. In East Yorkshire, we have a mixed network: large parts of East Yorkshire have no BT network at all and are entirely on the Kingston Communications system—now known as KCOM. That is why there are no red telephone boxes; we have white or cream telephone boxes locally. When I worked in America, someone bought me a postcard of red phone boxes to remind me of home, but of course they were entirely alien to me as I grew up in the piece of East Yorkshire where red phone boxes and BT did not exist.

In parts of East Yorkshire, we have the KCOM network. In other parts, including the part that I live in and represent, we have the BT Openreach network and we also increasingly have the Kingston Communications network. That is why I am concerned about some of the amendments tabled by the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), to which the shadow Minister spoke on her behalf, and about anything that potentially gives an anti-competitive advantage to one provider over another.

I do not have a particular problem with BT Openreach, which did a reasonably good job in the first fibre roll-out—the fibre-to-the-cabinet 24 megabit roll-out—across North Lincolnshire and my part of the East Riding of Yorkshire, which was generally delivered on time and in line with the contract. However, that is obviously not sufficient now, some years on. People increasingly demand and require proper full fibre to the premises, and I am afraid that that is where BT Openreach has not done its job. It has been left to Kingston Communications to roll out proper gigabit broadband to Goole, Broughton and, increasingly, Brigg and other communities in my constituency. We welcome that. As I said, it is purely competition and the work of Ofcom which has enabled us to have that.

Despite my praise of KCOM, those works have not been without some difficulties locally. Some of its pavement and streetworks leave something to be desired, and it has occasionally set fire to a number of residents’ hedges, which is awkward for residents and KCOM. Those problems and troubles aside, we now have significant roll-out of gigabit broadband to the premises as a result of that competition. Indeed, that is why the UK, having languished at the bottom of the full fibre league tables for some time, has begun to rise to a more respectable position.

As I said in my intervention on the Minister, I have some concerns about the amendments that seem to give preference to BT Openreach in some places. As I say, I

[Andrew Percy]

have no problem with BT Openreach, but the Minister needs to look at some of its investment decisions. For years, it refused to provide full-fibre broadband to most parts of my constituency, including Goole. KCOM came along and did one part of it, leaving Old Goole. We put a town deal bid together to try to roll out full gigabit broadband to Old Goole, and then all of a sudden—I am sure it was entirely unconnected—BT Openreach gave notice that it planned to upgrade the exchange in Old Goole, but could not confirm whether it planned to roll out to premises. That leaves us in a quandary: should we proceed with our town deal, using public money on that project? I am sure it is all a coincidence, but it is important that the Minister looks at how many coincidences there are, where there is investment by one alternative provider and suddenly the behaviour of BT Openreach around that provider seems to take a certain pattern. As I say, I am sure it is all a complete and utter coincidence.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Does he accept that the point he is making about competition goes wider than Brigg and Goole? The more competition we see across the country, the better the provision will be.

Andrew Percy: Indeed, but as my right hon. Friend will know, Brigg and Goole is of course the most important place in this country, and I am therefore particularly exercised by what happens there. He is absolutely right, though: that competition, which is also seeing the KCOM network expanded and rolled out in his constituency in the northern bit of East Yorkshire, is really very important. That is not to say that BT Openreach does not have an incredibly important role to play—of course it does, and I praise it for its work in getting gigabit broadband expanded across the country, but some of its behaviour raises questions.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore), who moved amendment 14 and spoke to the group I am referring to, brushed aside concerns about private property rights and the claims that BT Openreach and others will potentially have greater powers than the police to enter private property. He said that that would all be on the basis of no loss or damage. Well, that is all fine, but it is a fairly high bar in loss of personal property rights—or a low bar, depending on how you want to think of it. I was not exactly comforted by his dismissal of people's legitimate concerns around one provider having particular rights to access property that others would not have. On that basis, I urge the Government to reject and oppose those amendments.

Julia Lopez: I am grateful to all Members who have spoken in this debate, to the Opposition for their support for the Bill, and to the hon. Member for Ogmores (Chris Elmore) in particular for the very collaborative approach he has taken throughout and his acknowledgement of the improvements we have made. I shall test officials on the further points he makes. I am also grateful to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Owen Thompson) for highlighting the product security parts of the Bill. Some of the detail he seeks will be in secondary legislation. Goods sold in online marketplaces, for instance, are not

out of scope, because manufacturers, importers and distributors are covered. I would be happy to come back to him on some of the other points he raised.

On criticism of our roll-out, we are making substantial progress on our gigabit roll-out. We are now up to 68% coverage, up from 9% in 2019. I am open to any proposal to make roll-out go even faster. I have set out why competition is so important to that dynamic and why I think the amendments on MDUs are not the right way to go and could even slow the roll-out. I note the comments on BT Openreach. Other providers tell me that they have great teams negotiating wayleaves, that this is a straightforward process and that extra help on MDUs of the kind envisaged is simply not needed. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) for using KCOM as a great example of that, and for highlighting not only some of the good work that Openreach does, but the interesting example of his town deal, which I shall take away with me.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) made a typically fruity and passionate speech. We believe our legislation incentivises greater collaboration. I set out in detail earlier why that is the case. We believe that rents were too high. As the need for digital infrastructure increases, we think rents need to become more akin to those for utilities. I should never wish to be accused of seeing property as theft. Indeed, I confess to taking umbrage at my right hon. Friend's assertion on Second Reading. That is why I have tested his proposition—

Sir Desmond Swayne: I withdraw.

Julia Lopez: I thank my right hon. Friend. I am glad that I have convinced him of the case. [Laughter.] As I say, I tested his proposition to death and concluded that there may be a case of creative hyperbole. I am glad he has also acknowledged that.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 1 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 2

JURISDICTION OF FIRST-TIER TRIBUNAL IN RELATION TO CODE PROCEEDINGS IN WALES

In paragraph 95(1) of the electronic communications code (power to confer jurisdiction on other tribunals)—

- (a) in paragraph (a), at the end insert “or the Upper Tribunal”;
- (b) in paragraph (aa), for the words from “, but only” to the end substitute “or the Upper Tribunal”;
- (c) omit paragraph (b).—(*Julia Lopez.*)

This new clause gives the Secretary of State power to make regulations providing for a function conferred by the code on the court to be exercisable in relation to Wales by the First-tier Tribunal.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

Clause 57

MEANING OF “OCCUPIER” IN RELATION TO LAND OCCUPIED BY AN OPERATOR

Amendment made: 1, page 40, line 11, leave out Clause 57.—(*Julia Lopez.*)

This amendment is consequential on NC1.

Clause 58RIGHTS UNDER THE ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS
CODE TO SHARE APPARATUS

Amendments made: 2, page 41, leave out lines 23 to 25 and insert—

‘(4) In paragraph 9 (conferral of code rights), after sub-paragraph (2) (as inserted by section (Persons able to confer code rights on operators in exclusive occupation)) insert—’

This amendment is consequential on NC1.

Amendment 3, page 41, line 26, leave out “But”—(*Julia Lopez.*)

This amendment is consequential on NC1.

Clause 59UPGRADING AND SHARING OF APPARATUS: SUBSISTING
AGREEMENTS

Amendment proposed: 14, page 42, line 11, after “agreement”, insert

“other than with a private landlord”.—(*Chris Elmore.*)

This amendment, together with amendments 15, 16 and 17, would apply a different regime under the Electronic Communications Code to private landlords, giving automatic upgrade rights for operators to properties owned by private landlords subject to the condition that the upgrading imposes no additional burden on the other party to the agreement.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 163, Noes 280.

Division No. 9]**[2.57 pm]****AYES**

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	De Cordova, Marsha
Abrahams, Debbie	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Ali, Rushanara	Dodds, Anneliese
Ali, Tahir	Doughty, Stephen
Amesbury, Mike	Duffield, Rosie
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Eagle, Dame Angela
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Eagle, Maria
Beckett, rh Margaret	Edwards, Jonathan
Begum, Apsana	Elmore, Chris
Benn, rh Hilary	Eshalomi, Florence
Blomfield, Paul	Farron, Tim
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Farry, Stephen
Brown, Ms Lyn	Fovargue, Yvonne
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Foxcroft, Vicky
Bryant, Chris	Furniss, Gill
Burton, Richard	Gardiner, Barry
Byrne, Ian	Glendon, Mary
Cadbury, Ruth	Green, Kate
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Green, Sarah
Chamberlain, Wendy	Greenwood, Lilian
Champion, Sarah	Greenwood, Margaret
Cooper, Daisy	Griffith, Nia
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gwynne, Andrew
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hamilton, Mrs Paulette
Creasy, Stella	Hanna, Claire
Cruddas, Jon	Hardy, Emma
Cryer, John	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cummins, Judith	Harris, Carolyn
Cunningham, Alex	Hayes, Helen
Daby, Janet	Healey, rh John
David, Wayne	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Davies, Geraint	Hillier, Dame Meg
Davies-Jones, Alex	Hobhouse, Wera

Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz (*Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden*)
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lynch, Holly
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Shabana
Maskell, Rachael
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, James
Nandy, Lisa
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onwurah, Chi
Oppong-Asare, Abena
Osamor, Kate
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo

Owen, Sarah
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh John
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Sultana, Sarah
Tarry, Sam
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Valerie
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitley, Mick
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Navendu Mishra

NOES

Afolami, Bim	Bell, Aaron
Afriyie, Adam	Benton, Scott
Aiken, Nickie	Beresford, Sir Paul
Aldous, Peter	Berry, rh Jake
Allan, Lucy	Bhatti, Saqib
Anderson, Lee	Blackman, Bob
Andrew, rh Stuart	Bone, Mr Peter
Ansell, Caroline	Bottomley, Sir Peter
Argar, Edward	Bowie, Andrew
Atherton, Sarah	Bradley, Ben
Atkins, Victoria	Bradley, rh Karen
Bailey, Shaun	Brady, Sir Graham
Baillie, Siobhan	Braverman, rh Suella
Baker, Duncan	Brereton, Jack
Baker, Mr Steve	Bridgen, Andrew
Baldwin, Harriett	Bristow, Paul
Baron, Mr John	Britcliffe, Sara
Baynes, Simon	Browne, Anthony

Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo
 Cleverly, rh James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Dorries, rh Ms Nadine
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert

Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherylyn
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 Mayhew, Jerome

McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Purslove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine

Scully, Paul
 Seely, Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
 David T. C. Davies and
 Steve Double

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 68

USE OF ALTERNATIVE DISPUTE RESOLUTION

Amendments made: 4, page 58, line 41, after “operator” insert “or the relevant person”.

This amendment and Amendments 5, 6 and 7 ensure that a person from whom an operator is seeking a code agreement may, at any time, give the operator a notice stating that the person wishes to engage in alternative dispute resolution in relation to the prospective agreement.

Amendment 5, page 58, line 41, leave out “relevant person” and insert “other”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 4.

Amendment 6, page 58, line 42, after “operator” insert “or the relevant person (as the case may be)”.

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 4.

Amendment 7, page 58, line 43 [Clause 68], leave out “relevant person” and insert “other”.—(*Julia Lopez.*)

See the explanatory statement for Amendment 4.

Schedule

UNRESPONSIVE OCCUPIERS: CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendment made: 8, page 67, line 29, leave out sub-paragraph (11).—(*Julia Lopez.*)

This amendment is consequential on NC2.

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

3.10 pm

Julia Lopez: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Romans built the roads, the Victorians built our canals and railways, and our generational challenge is to make sure that the UK has world-class digital infrastructure. That is not just about the needs of today, when we depend on reliable connections for online meetings, television streaming or calling friends and family. We are rolling out, at breakneck speed, full-fibre networks that will last for decades and cater for tomorrow's needs, alongside more extensive wireless infrastructure to end the frustration of terrible signal and slow downloads.

The Bill is one tool that we need to deliver great connectivity for everyone, and I am grateful for the cross-party recognition of the importance of our task. The Government also recognise that greater connectivity brings the greater threat of harm to individuals, organisations and networks through an increased risk of cyber-attack. If networks and devices are not secure or trusted, we undermine their potential benefit to people and businesses.

I thank the consumer group, Which?, for its campaign that supported the development of our Bill. Not only are our measures important to protect people's online security when enjoying the benefits of technology, but they will help to protect people's personal safety. I particularly thank Jessica Eagleton of the domestic violence charity, Refuge, for her compelling evidence at the Public Bill Committee. The Bill is backed by industry experts and I thank them for their input. Other countries are already following suit, and with this Bill, the first domestic piece of legislation in the world to introduce security requirements of connected products, we are global leaders in the cyber-security landscape.

In short, this Bill is vital to the success of our digital economy in the decades ahead. Once passed, its measures will make the UK a better connected place and more resilient against cyber-attacks. Before it moves to the other place, I extend my thanks to the departmental officials for their work preparing the Bill; to the Opposition for their pragmatic and collaborative approach; to the members of the Bill Committee and the witnesses for their commitment; to the parliamentary Clerks, without whose efforts we would not be attending this debate; and to Members from across the House, including my Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), for the scrutiny and support they have provided. I look forward to seeing this important piece of legislation come into force. I commend the Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, Chris Elmore.

3.12 pm

Chris Elmore: I do not intend to detain the House for long. Her Majesty's Opposition recognise that the first duty of any Government is to keep their citizens safe. That is why we are supporting the security elements of the Bill, which were developed by the Department in conjunction with the National Cyber Security Centre. As the digital sphere becomes ever more integral to our lives and livelihoods, it is of the utmost importance that citizens across the United Kingdom are protected from malign actors. We believe that the Bill will make some significant progress in that regard.

Although we think that measures in part 1, such as the ban on default passwords, are of paramount importance and will no doubt bring benefits, we have concerns about a number of other areas. The legislation establishes, through regulations, three core security requirements for “connectable products”. Rather than those three security requirements being left to be defined in future, we believe that they should be expressly set out in the Bill. That would speed up the entire process and ensure that consumers are protected sooner rather than later.

Similarly, we would like the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—it is a pleasure to see her in her place—if she is not too busy trashing another one of our great British institutions, to prepare and publish a report on the security risks to UK connected products. During an oral evidence session on the Bill, Professor Madeline Carr, a cyber-security expert, told us that she would not have an Alexa in her house due to the security risks and that there is nothing in the Bill that would change her mind. Due to that statement by an industry expert, and the prominent role that cyber-warfare is playing throughout the conflict zones of the world, we think that it is very much in the national interest to know how secure our connected products are, and we call on the Government to go much, much further.

The Prime Minister came into office promising “full-fibre” broadband by 2025. Due to a lack of application and grip from the Prime Minister and the Government that he leads, that target was quickly downgraded to full gigabit broadband by 2025. In what was a surprise to absolutely no one who follows this Administration closely, the target was downgraded again to 85% gigabit-capable broadband by 2025. There are still huge doubts—voiced by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the Public Accounts Committee and industry—that even that twice-reduced target will yet be achieved, selling Britain short at every opportunity.

I take no pleasure whatever in pointing out those failures. Indeed, I believe that they are hugely damaging to the future economic potential of our country and to the UK's social fabric. That is because a digital divide exists in our country and it is only getting worse. One such divide is the fact that, when it comes to digital connectivity, many communities in rural and semi-rural areas, including my Ogmere constituency, are being left behind completely. With the increase in working from home and schoolwork being done over the internet since the pandemic, the Government urgently need to get a grip on this critical issue.

[Chris Elmore]

In detailing the Government's failings when it comes to our telecommunications infrastructure, I think of our own Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who had a vision of the internet being "for everyone". However, the Government's inaction is ensuring that that is currently not the case. In 2010, the Labour party left behind a world-leading sector for communication and mobile phone roll-out. The Government have stagnated and stalled over the past 12 years and have failed to build on Labour's success.

I repeat what I have said throughout the passage of the Bill: I support the Bill's aim of both increasing the security of our connected devices and speeding up the roll-out of our telecommunications infrastructure. Our point of contention is that the Bill, as currently constituted, does not do either as well as it could. It does not deliver what people in this country desperately need: improved broadband.

As the Bill makes its passage to the other place, we hope that the issues raised about it can be taken up by their lordships to ensure that the improvements can be made and, hopefully, some amendments won. I echo what the Minister said about the constructive nature of our debates—I am not sure that we will be able to continue that with other Bills that she and I may spar over in the months ahead, but I am sure we will try.

I thank the Clerks and all House staff who worked so diligently during the Bill Committee, including the evidence sessions. I thank the witnesses for their expert advice, which was truly valuable. I thank my staff, including Alex Williams and James Small-Edwards, who did an enormous amount of work—I do not have the luxury of civil servants, but perhaps one day soon—[*Interruption.*] The Secretary of State says "Dream on". She has certainly been having a few dreams of her own of late that are not working very well, particularly for the Prime Minister. I pay tribute to my staff, who have worked diligently during this process, and I thank all the Members who have played such an integral part in ensuring that the Bill passes through the House with civility and good humour throughout.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Owen Thompson.

3.18 pm

Owen Thompson: I echo much of what the hon. Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore) said. My comments on Second Reading remain. In particular, my points about enforcement will need further attention, but as I have said all the way through, we support the principles behind the Bill. Despite the requirement for tweaks—if I may put it that way—where we would like to see things go a bit further and done slightly differently, that does not take away from the principles behind the Bill, which we are happy to support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Ukraine

[*Relevant documents: e-petition 609530, "Waive visa requirement for Ukrainian refugees"; e-petition 607314, "Pledge any necessary military support to defend Ukraine"; e-petition 609382, "Offer fast track asylum to any Ukrainians displaced due to the invasion"; Written evidence to the International Development Committee, Correspondence between the Chair of the International Development Committee and the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs relating to food insecurity following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reported to the House on 19 April and 24 May 2022; Twelfth Report of the Treasury Committee, "Defeating Putin: the development, implementation and impact of economic sanctions on Russia", Session 2021-22, HC 1186; Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 25 April 2022, on Russia: effective economic sanctions, Session 2021-22, HC 1186.*]

3.19 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Ukraine.

It has been exactly one month since the Secretary of State for Defence last came to this House to provide an update on Putin's brutal, unprovoked and illegal invasion. In that time, Russian troops have failed to take Kyiv and their initial strategic plans have been thrown into complete disarray. They have suffered heavy losses on a par with those in their nine-year conflict in Afghanistan, including more than 15,000 personnel and hundreds of tanks, vehicles and helicopters. They have also strengthened the resolve of the international community in a way that has not been seen for decades.

Rather than back down, however, Putin has refocused efforts on the eastern Donbas in a bid to entrench control of a land bridge with Crimea to the south. The people paying the tragic cost of his unrelenting war are still the Ukrainian men, women and children who have been bombed in hospitals, blown up in schools and bombarded in railway stations. The number of Ukrainian civilians killed has risen to more than 3,500—including, I regret to say, 250 children—and up to 100 Ukrainian troops are reported to be dying in the battle for the Donbas every day.

The latest intelligence shows that Putin's troops are currently bombarding and encircling cities including Severodonetsk, Lysychansk and Rubizhne, while in Mariupol, the last Ukrainian fighters have now been evacuated from the steelworks after more than 10 weeks of brave resistance. It is extremely concerning to hear appalling comments about those gallant defenders from certain Russian MPs. Russia must treat these soldiers in full accordance with the Geneva convention.

In the Black sea, Russia is continuing to block shipping lanes and reinforce its troops on Snake Island, but it is clear that their momentum has slowed, and in places Ukrainian forces are beginning to push them back to their borders. In Kharkiv, for instance, the fact that three quarters of the 1.4 million inhabitants are Russian speakers has not had one iota of impact on their resolve. Instead, Putin's forces have been unceremoniously driven out of Ukraine's second city—not just a major

strategic blow for the Kremlin, but a symbolic one, as it peddled the lie that Russian invaders would be welcomed with open arms.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware that the blockade of the Black sea is one of the contributory factors to rapidly escalating food prices in global markets. In fact, 26 countries now have export bans on various foodstuffs to protect prices for their own domestic markets. This is now blockading some 15% of the world's calorie intake, according to *The Economist*. Are the Government treating the reopening of the food supply from Ukraine as an urgent matter? I appreciate that it is very complex and sensitive, but will the Government confirm that they are attaching extreme urgency to it? Otherwise, we will have more starvation and more famines in some of the poorest countries in the world.

Jeremy Quin: My hon. Friend makes an acute observation. He is absolutely right to draw the House's attention to the matter, which is of profound concern. We were in a bad situation with food supplies even before war in Ukraine; we are in a worse situation now. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America informs me that, unsurprisingly, the matter was discussed at the meeting of G7 Ministers; it has also twice been the subject of conversations between the Prime Minister and President Zelensky. It is very much a focus for the Government, and we are in discussions with our NATO allies in the Black sea and others. It is a complex situation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) reminds us, but I assure him that we are very focused on it.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Given the phenomenal impact on world food supplies, the cost of living crisis here, and the forecasts, which are now increasing, that the global economy will shrink by something like £750 billion thanks to this war, why is more not being done to invest in armoury and defence weaponry to basically kick Russia out of Ukraine? I understand that something like £7 billion of military aid has been provided. Is that enough? Should the world not be doing more, in its own self-interest?

Jeremy Quin: I remind the hon. Gentleman that I said at the start of my remarks that the world has never been more united over the past few decades. We have committed more than £1.3 billion of military equipment. The people who are doing the heavy work are the gallant defenders of Ukraine, the members of the Ukrainian armed forces; they are being supplied by this country and by many allies around the world. We have organised two donor conferences; I was at a donor conference earlier this week. Military supplies and defensive equipment are coming in from all over the world, in addition to a vast package of economic sanctions against Russia.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The blockade of Odesa is a matter of extreme seriousness. Unless the silos are emptied in the next few weeks, there will be nowhere for the harvest to go. Tens of thousands of people in some of the most vulnerable countries in the world will starve, with all the geopolitical consequences that that will bring. Does that not mean that we need to lift the blockade in Odesa as a matter of urgency? What are we doing to provide Harpoon missiles, for example,

to ensure that the ships currently blockading Odesa are dealt with? Unless we can clean up the Black sea so that mines do not pose a threat, we cannot expect insurance companies to insure merchant shipping. That will mean that ships will not leave port.

Jeremy Quin: My right hon. and gallant Friend is right that the situation adds a significant risk to starvation globally, with many of the poorest areas of the world most affected; that has been caused directly as a result of the illegal and brutal invasion by Putin. He is also right that we need to work consistently and hard to get a solution that gets grain out of Ukraine and into world markets; I assure him that we are working on that. I can further assure him that coastal defensive missiles are absolutely a part of the package of equipment that we and others are supporting in Ukraine.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD) *rose—*

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) *rose—*

Jeremy Quin: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), as he got in first, but then I should make a bit of progress, if that is all right with my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy).

Jamie Stone: The Minister is being extraordinarily generous. As the flip side of what he says about our supplying the Ukrainians with equipment, it would be interesting to know what things are like on the Russian side. The Russians' shells and missiles will be finite. Have we any knowledge of whether there is a chance that they might start to run short of the kit that they need?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman raises a very good point. There is considerable evidence of significant depletion of Russian equipment and stocks. Clearly, ammunition stocks are less visible, but there has been open source reporting about T-62s—tanks that were designed 60 years ago, although some were upgraded in '83—being brought out of garages. There is significant evidence that Russia is suffering serious depletion, as the fact of 15,000 personnel being killed in the conflict would suggest.

As I am in a generous mood, I shall give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole if he is still keen to intervene, but then I must make progress.

Andrew Percy: The Minister has highlighted the outrages committed by the Russians. Those outrages include reports of attacks on ambulances and first responders, so I thank him for his work helping us to secure export licences for the battlefield ambulances produced by the brilliant team at the O&H Venari Group ambulance factory in Goole. He knows the project very well: former British military vehicles are converted into battlefield ambulances, 58 of which have been produced so far. They are now in service in Ukraine, so I thank the Minister and his team for their work on securing the export licences. Will he pay tribute to the workers at O&H?

Jeremy Quin: I pay tribute to the company's workers and to my hon. Friend, who was very assiduous, at all hours of the day, in making certain that Ministers were

[Jeremy Quin]

aware of the project and the need to get those export licences through. I am glad that officials in the two Departments have moved very swiftly to achieve those export licences. The brutality shown by Russian forces in this conflict is shocking. I am glad that we are doing our utmost to support the humanitarian effort in Ukraine, having provided civilian ambulances, battlefield ambulances and simple things such as generators.

We were discussing the fact that Kharkiv was a real and symbolic blow to Russian plans, which we have to believe are coming unstuck. The firing of seven Russian commanders in recent weeks—including the lieutenant general who headed up the invasion of Kharkiv—reeks of a culture of scapegoating and cover-ups, and there is a record of aggression, brutality and incompetence. No wonder the veteran Russian diplomat Boris Bondarev said, as he bravely resigned his post this week, that he had “never been so ashamed” of his country.

At this critical juncture, our aim remains clear: Russia cannot win. We will continue to support our Ukrainian friends, focusing on three key aspects. First, there is the military response, which is about providing a wide range of support to Ukraine so that it can defend itself and its sovereignty. We were the first European country to supply lethal aid, and we have committed to spending at least £1.3 billion on military support. So far, we have delivered in excess of 6,500 anti-tank missiles, many of which have been used successfully to repel columns of tanks, as well as eight air defence systems, including Brimstone and Starstreak missiles—the fastest in the world, travelling at some 2,000 mph. We have also delivered 15 Wolfhound armoured vehicles, which provide increased protection for essential supplies, as well as a small number of armoured Stormer vehicles fitted with Starstreak launchers to further enhance Ukraine’s short-range anti-air capabilities.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend for the work that he and the Ministry of Defence have done in supporting the Ukrainian forces in their hour of need. We face a dilemma, in that as we empty our quartermasters’ stores, they need to be replenished. If he needs help persuading the Treasury to give the Ministry of Defence money to make sure that those Starstreaks, next-generation light anti-tank weapons and Brimstones are replenished, please will he get in touch?

Jeremy Quin: I know that the door of my right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Defence Committee, is always open for such discussions. The Treasury has been very clear that we need to replenish our stocks, and that it will support us in ensuring that they are replenished. I can also assure him that we are making certain that we remain well within our tolerances. There are tasks here for which we always need to be ready, and I can assure him that we remain ready for them.

The equipment that we provide must be as effective as possible, so we are training specialist Ukrainian units in its use. Last month, for example, Ukrainian troops learned how to use our armoured fighting vehicles on Salisbury plain, and those vehicles have now started to arrive in Ukraine; the number will build to 120 in total. Our support does not end there. The House will be pleased to hear that the challenge laid down by Putin’s

brutal war has been seized by UK industry. I have been delighted by the agility that the UK’s defence sector has shown, working closely with Defence Equipment and Support, in bringing through innovative ideas; in some cases, those ideas literally go from desktop to theatre in a matter of weeks. I am determined to maintain this innovative drive, so that we capture every idea, support the best of them, and then swiftly put the results in the hands of our Ukrainian friends.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Can the Minister set out how support for Ukrainian forces will be updated or augmented to deal with increased and intense artillery bombardment from better supplied Russian forces? They have retreated much closer to their own borders, and their supply lines have greatly opened up. Given that, how can we further support Ukraine in defending itself?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman knows that we are doing our utmost to support our Ukrainian friends. There are intense discussions between our Ukrainian friends and the Ministry of Defence at a number of levels, including between myself, my hon. Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces and our opposite numbers in Ukraine. We are ensuring that the equipment that we source to support Ukraine is tailored to its needs and its battle plan in the weeks and months ahead. The hon. Gentleman is right that opportunities may well open up, but I do not for one second underestimate the fierceness of the fight and how intense it is at present in Donbas.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware that a small number of us in this House have constituents who have been fighting with the Ukrainian armed forces and who are now held in captivity, either by the Russian authorities or their associates. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is providing a degree of consular support to us and to their families, but could I encourage him and other Ministers to give this priority? I urge them to speak with the British and International Red Cross—I suspect that they will prove to be the best interlocutors—to help secure a satisfactory outcome and good treatment for these individuals, who are British citizens, and to help to secure their speedy release and return either to Ukraine or the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Quin: That is something that we take extremely seriously. These are, of course, British citizens who have been caught up in the conflict, and they will be provided with all possible consular assistance. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America has confirmed that, which should come as no surprise to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). Although we really do discourage anyone from going to Ukraine in these circumstances, the Ukrainian Government have made it clear that where other nationals have been combatants, they are prisoners of war and should be treated as such, in full compliance with the Geneva convention. That is exactly what we expect of every nation.

In addition to providing lethal and non-lethal equipment, we have been facilitating the delivery of equipment from other countries by convening two international donor conferences and providing logistic support. We have been speaking to partners across eastern Europe to encourage them to donate their former Soviet kit, with

which Ukrainians are more familiar. For example, Poland is now donating T-72 tanks to Ukraine in return for a temporary deployment of Challenger 2 tanks from the UK.

At a time of heightened tension, it is vital that we continue to provide reassurance to our NATO allies in eastern Europe. As part of this effort, we have sent Typhoons to Cyprus to patrol south-east European skies, have deployed frigates and destroyers to the eastern Mediterranean and the Baltic sea, and have temporarily doubled our military presence in Estonia to 1,700 personnel. In other words, where Putin wanted less NATO, he is now getting much, much more.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): There is clearly considerable agreement across the House on these issues. One of the important areas in which we have played our part, and should play our part more, is the provision of refuge for those who are seeking a home away from the conflict. People in Sheffield responded very generously to the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but are expressing enormous frustration at the inability of the Home Office to deliver visas within the timeframe that we would expect. At the beginning of April, when Lord Harrington—for whom I have a high regard—took responsibility for the scheme, he set a public target of 48 hours from when people “download the application form” to when they are given permission to travel. I have constituency cases in which families who applied on 26 March still do not have permission to travel two months later, and it is clear that my experience is shared by Members across the House.

People have told me that they are now applying a second time, particularly when children are involved, because they face such long delays and they have no faith that their original application is still being worked on. Obviously that will only cause further complications and congestion in the system. What assurance can the Minister give me that he will take this up with the Home Office, and that we will do something to meet the obligations we took on, and the ambition that we set, when we launched the Homes for Ukraine scheme?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman asked his question very sincerely, and I know that his experience is shared by many Members. As a constituency MP, I have encountered such cases myself.

We are all keen to see these visas processed as soon as possible. As the hon. Gentleman will know, a significant number have been provided—I think it is more than 107,000 now—but I appreciate that that makes no difference to those who are sitting outside Ukraine with diminishing amounts of money, wanting to come to this country and to a home that is desperate to have them and embrace them. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department—my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is sitting beside me—recognises that there are issues relating to children in particular; the Home Office is working assiduously to try to get on top of all these issues. In my personal experience, the system seems to be getting faster and better, but we are not there yet, and that work continues to be done by my friends in the Home Office.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): Before the Minister moves on to the subject of NATO commitments, may I raise the subject of direct

support for Ukraine? As he knows, it has historical debt problems, and the invasion will obviously have a huge economic impact; the statistics are clear to us all. Can the Minister say something about the co-ordination of direct international financial support for Ukraine, and how we can keep the country solvent during a time when that is a very pressing matter for it?

Jeremy Quin: We have supplied significant funds directly to Ukraine to help it through this incredibly difficult period. I cannot lay my hands on the exact amount, but the House may be blessed with the figure later in my remarks. We are also working with the G7 and others. Clearly, Ukraine is suffering from extraordinary problems at present, and the international community recognises that. It also recognises that Ukraine is standing up for a cause that means so much to us all, so the hon. Gentleman's point is well made.

If I may, I will move on to our economic response. We are escalating our sanctions regime still further to stymie the Russian war machine and isolate Putin. The UK has now sanctioned more than 1,000 individuals and 100 entities, including oligarchs with a net worth of more than £100 billion. In recent days we have focused on his inner circle and the shady financial network surrounding him. This is alongside the asset freezes, trade bans and tariffs that we and other G7 nations have imposed in recent months. Over time, this economic contraction and the restriction of access to complex components will have an ever-deepening impact on the Russian war machine. As time goes on, despite their daily dose of propaganda, it will be harder and harder for the Russian people to ignore the evidence that their leaders are betraying them and their interests.

Geraint Davies: Will the Minister give way on the issue of sanctions?

Jeremy Quin: I am conscious that other hon. Members want to speak, but I will of course allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene.

Geraint Davies: The Minister is probably aware that Putin signed a deal at the Olympics in Beijing for Russia to provide 10 billion cubic metres of gas per year from 2025, compared with 1.25 billion a year now, and that it is supplying more to Indonesia and India as well. Would he accept that, by working with China, Russia will be able to avoid the impact of sanctions over time, and that the imperative is to provide military assistance to get Russia out of Ukraine?

Jeremy Quin: There is an overall strategy to achieve the objective to which the hon. Gentleman refers. It is part defensive military aid, part economic and part diplomatic, and all those parts have a role in achieving our overall objective. Analysts are suggesting that, as a result of the economic package of measures delivered by the global community against the Russian economy, there has been a contraction of 10% to 15% in Russian GDP. That is extraordinary contraction. It takes the Russian people back to where they were before the Putin regime commenced, which has to have a direct impact—not only on them and the way that they think about the regime that is betraying their interests, but on the Russian war machine.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Jeremy Quin: I will, but then, if hon. Members will excuse me, I should probably make progress. I am conscious that I have perhaps been speaking for too long to allow others a chance to speak.

Janet Daby: I am extremely grateful. My intervention is similar to that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). I have constituents from Ukraine. They are a family of five, but their children have been unsuccessful in obtaining visas. I recognise that there is a priority for visas for Ukrainian people who are outside the UK. Could the Minister ask his ministerial colleagues at the Home Office to look at this case and perhaps give it a degree of priority, so that this family can get their benefits and so on?

Jeremy Quin: I ask the hon. Lady to write to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay, who is sitting beside me on the Front Bench; he has generously said that he will assure her of a response as soon as possible to the question she has asked on behalf of her constituents.

Thirdly and finally, there is the diplomatic response. We are working intensively with our allies and partners to make it clear to the Russian Government that they must withdraw their forces and engage genuinely in peace negotiations. The Prime Minister has visited in Sweden and Finland to agree increased co-operation on security, and to discuss their applications to join NATO, which I am delighted have now been formally received. We have been clear about our view that those countries should be integrated into the alliance as soon as possible. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary was in Germany to attend the G7 and NATO Foreign Ministers' meetings, where she pressed the need for further support for Ukraine. The Defence Secretary met his US counterpart, Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin, at the Pentagon two weeks ago, and he is in Madrid today for similar discussions ahead of the NATO summit. I will likewise be heading to Canada in a few days' time.

We are working closely with our allies to hold Putin and his regime to account for their appalling war crimes. This week we have seen the first Russian soldier jailed for life in Ukraine for murdering 62-year-old civilian Oleksandr Shelipov, but the Ukrainian authorities believe that more than 11,000 other war crimes have been committed, from the indiscriminate targeting of civilians to rape and sexual violence, so we have sent support into the country to help collect evidence, including witness statements and video recordings. We have provided additional funding to the International Criminal Court, as well as technical assistance via UK military and police personnel. We have also appointed Sir Howard Morrison to support the Ukrainian prosecutor general in her investigations.

Even as we work to stop Putin, we must continue to support the Ukrainian people who are bearing the brunt of Russian brutality. The UN estimates that more than 6 million people have been forced to flee the country, while a further 8 million have been internally displaced. That is why we have committed nearly £400 million of humanitarian and economic aid so far, including more than 5 million medical items, 42 ambulances and more than 500 mobile generators.

At home, the British public have demonstrated their great generosity once again, with more than 200,000 individuals and organisations signing up to offer help. The Ukraine family and sponsorship schemes have, together, issued more than 107,000 visas so far.

We are also preparing to help Ukraine rebuild when this war is finally over. The Foreign Secretary spoke to G7 leaders about the need for a new Marshall plan for the country, which could be paid for in part using Russian assets—the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) will be pleased to hear that.

We have already pledged £174 million in aid to help Ukraine's economy to recover, including a three-year package of support for energy security and reform. In reference to the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), the Secretary of State for Transport recently met his Ukrainian counterpart to discuss ways of getting grain out of the country, which would provide a vital lifeline to the local economy and a much-needed global commodity.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend has been very generous in giving way. I was pleased to attend the Lennart Meri security conference in Tallinn last weekend, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America, who is in his place, also attended. The support for Britain was overwhelming, reflected not just in those who attended the conference but in the result of the Eurovision song contest, in which we rightly came second to Ukraine.

The Minister is speaking about what other assistance we can provide. Will he clarify whether there is any truth in the reports that we will now be providing hard-power support—troops—to Moldova, in addition to our support for Ukraine?

Jeremy Quin: To answer the question precisely, I am aware of no current plans to do that, but we have a close relationship with Moldova. We work co-operatively with Moldova, and it is a relationship we are keen to foster and build on.

The Ukrainians won the battle of Kyiv and the battle of Kharkiv. They are more than holding their own in bitter fighting, but there remains a long way to go before this war can be won. We must therefore continue to stand by our Ukrainian friends for the long term. They are fighting not just for their survival but for the values of freedom, democracy and justice that are the essence of our society. That is why they must succeed, and this House can rest assured that the United Kingdom will continue to do everything in its power to make sure that outcome is achieved.

3.48 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Minister for updating the House on the Government's actions in Ukraine. There is cross-party support for their action to support our friends in Ukraine, and those watching this debate from the Kremlin will not find disagreement between the Opposition and the Government that Putin's criminal invasion of Ukraine must be resisted. We will continue to support our friends in Ukraine until that free, sovereign and democratic country is back in the hands of the Ukrainian people.

Amid today's other events, we must not forget that Ukraine faces a truly grim milestone today: three months since Vladimir Putin launched his unprovoked, heinous and unjustifiable invasion of that sovereign state. Every hour of this conflict has been an hour too long. Every family uprooted and forced from their home is a family too many. And every life lost is a life too many.

On behalf of my party, I pay tribute to the extraordinary bravery and resolve shown by the Ukrainian people, both civilian and military, during these past three months. I also pay tribute to the British public, who have opened their homes and their hearts to those fleeing the conflict. Labour stands with our allies in providing assistance to Ukraine, and we support efforts to provide military, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian assistance. It is right that Britain has provided support to Ukraine to defend itself. I believe that our country is a force for good, and we can exhibit that when we put our values at the heart of our foreign policy. Backing not only our friends in Ukraine, but our allies on NATO's eastern flank is in Britain's national interest, just as much as it is about protecting those countries and friends we are supporting.

The Government have enjoyed Labour's support on this and will continue to do so. Our commitment to NATO is unshakeable. In last week's debate on NATO, I set out our commitment to the alliance and how we want to see that strengthened and expanded in the years to come. However, we now need to shift our strategic thinking from the crisis management that has defined the first three months to a medium-term military support strategy for Ukraine and our allies, to ensure that Putin's next offensive can be deterred and defeated. There are some crucial questions I want to ask the Minister on that. I do so in a spirit of cross-party co-operation, and I hope he will take them in that spirit.

This morning, the shadow Defence Secretary set out Labour's thinking on defence for the coming period in his speech at Chatham House, and I will borrow a few questions from it. I am sure the Minister has already heard them, so I hope he will forgive me for repeating them. We need to make sure that, as an alliance, we are continuing to supply artillery, armour, weaponry, loitering munitions and specialist missiles to our friends in Ukraine, in addition to non-military gear, such as medical kits and defensive armour for personnel.

As an alliance, we also need to go further in providing more anti-ship and anti-drone missiles, and in making sure there is a sufficient stockpile for Ukraine to deter any future aggression and offset the Russian aggression we are seeing at the moment. To do that, we need to make sure we have sufficient stocks to provide our friends in Ukraine and ourselves with the NLAWs—Next generation Light Anti-tank Weapons—and other missiles that we need. So will the Minister tell us whether the contracts have been signed to replenish our military stockpiles to date? There is a concern that they have not yet been and that stocks for our allies are being diverted to backfill UK military stocks. What progress has been made on the transition to NATO-style weaponry for our allies in eastern Europe? It is good to redeploy Soviet-era weaponry to our friends in Ukraine, because they are more familiar with it, but we need to make sure that it is backfilled with NATO-standard gear that can be better and more easily provided and equipped for our allies, both in Ukraine and in eastern Europe. What

is the training need to make that transition for those weapons systems? Will the Department fund the training as well as the weapons systems themselves?

Labour Members believe that we must continue to supply Ukraine with the appropriate weapons, and do so in a timely manner, but we know that there are problems with the UK's military procurement system, notwithstanding the efforts that have been made to sort out the fast deployment of NLAWs in particular. I pay tribute to the provision of NLAWs and Starstreak missiles to our friends in Ukraine, who have used them with agility and skill to attack and deter Russian aggression. The Defence Committee Chair's earlier intervention—I hope hon. Members have not used up all the interventions on the Minister and that I might get some as well—about backfilling stockpiles is a good one. We need reassurance on that, to make sure not only that we have sufficient stockpiles, but that, in the event of this conflict escalating and spreading, other allies can be reassured that there will be a steady flow of weapons and reinforcements.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman invited an intervention, which I am happy to furnish him with. He pointed out that there is a risk of escalation, which of course there is, but Ukraine is doing a very good job of containing this, to the surprise of many observers. Does he agree that at some point we are going to have to accept either a frozen conflict, as we are not going to defeat Putin—that seems unlikely and indeed it is not an aspiration that most of us have, as invading Russia is not part of our plan—or some sort of off-ramp, what Sun Tzu would refer to as a “golden bridge”? If the hon. Gentleman accepts that, what form does he think that bridge should take?

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman is my co-chair of the all-party group on the National Trust, and although we disagree on many things, we agree on some. I have to say that on this issue I do not share his view. We must continue to support our friends in Ukraine until Russia is driven out of Ukrainian territory. The Ukrainian people have the right to govern themselves in a free and democratic way. As a democracy and a sovereign country, we should support them until the point at which all Ukraine is free. That is the commitment that I believe the Prime Minister has made and that the Leader of the Opposition has made. On that, there is no distinction between us.

Dr Murrison: In that case, presumably the hon. Gentleman would include Crimea.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for putting me on the spot. I stand by what I have said. It is for the Ukrainian people to determine their own future. We in this place must not draw lines on a map on behalf of other countries. We have seen how that has gone in the past and it has not always been to the benefit of those countries or to us. I back the Ukrainian people to make their own decisions and define their own freedom in the future. I encourage all Members to take that position; otherwise, in speculating about options, we risk playing into Putin's hands, because someone will try to clip such remarks so that they can say, “In Britain, they are saying this.” We must not give them an inch of room to do that.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that the sanctions strategy can be unravelled over time? That is shown by the fact that since 2014, when the Crimea sanctions were introduced, the production of food in Russia has increased by 15%, with the production of cereals going up by 26%. Russia is now in the midst of doing oil deals with China, Indonesia, India and so on, in exchange for China supplying all the consumer markets, thereby displacing the European suppliers. Is not the imperative, therefore, to win in the sense of getting Russia out of Ukraine? What timeframe does my hon. Friend favour and what sort of objectives does he think we should have? Should we kick them out by the end of the year?

Luke Pollard: I think the Government themselves have admitted that some of the sanctions that were put in place after the invasion of Georgia, and certainly after the invasion of Crimea in 2014, have not been as effective as we would have liked them to be. We must be aware of Russia's ability to displace its economic trade with those countries in the west that have put sanctions in place to those countries that have not yet put them in place or, indeed, those that actively support or at least do not oppose Russian aggression. One of the defining challenges of the coming years will be to make sure not only that more countries around the world share the values of those in the west and the NATO alliance, but that other countries are discouraged from, for instance, taking steps to take Russian gas, and that we make the case for those countries to introduce economic measures and sanctions to support the effort to remove Russia from Ukraine in its totality. Russia must not get around the sanctions.

When we consider our medium-term strategy in Ukraine, we need to look at wider questions, some of which relate to the Government's integrated review. It is worth saying that there is much in the integrated review with which the Opposition agree. The assumptions and framing are good, and much of the research that fed into it is still credible and accurate, notwithstanding the invasion of Ukraine. Nevertheless, it is now prudent and wise to revisit some elements.

In our debates to date, there have been cross-party suggestions to Ministers that elements of the integrated review should be updated to ensure that it can be a relevant and accurate strategic framing document for the United Kingdom's armed forces and our overall diplomatic approach. That means the integrated review should be updated; that we should look at the paucity of references to Europe in it; and that we should look again at the strategy of tilting towards the Indo-Pacific, perhaps at the expense of securing our own backyard in the Euro-Atlantic area.

We also need to revisit the Army cuts. Given the invasion of Ukraine, it is not justifiable for the Government to continue to cut 10,000 roles from the Army. Between October and January this year alone, Army numbers have plunged by 1,000, and they are set to be cut further. It is not wise for the Government to continue with their £1.7 billion real-terms cut in day-to-day MOD spending. The Government have put in more money, but much of it has filled black holes in procurement programmes, and Ministers' agreement to cut day-to-day spending still stands.

We need to revisit the things I have outlined, and if the Government do revisit them, they will have Labour's support. We need to make sure that our leadership in NATO continues to be at the forefront. We must not risk any of that, which is why I suggest to Ministers today, as I did in the recent NATO debate, that they need to correct the flaws in the integrated review, review defence spending, reform defence procurement, rethink the Army cuts and, importantly, renew our international friendships, because we need to make sure that our values and alliances speak as strongly as the strength of our weapons and armed forces. There is much to be done and I would like to see greater urgency.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): One thing that has become increasingly clear is that the war in Ukraine will not be a short conflict; it will go on for some time. It is important therefore that we maintain our solidarity and our practical support. That means continuing the supply of armaments, which prompts the question: have we sufficient resources of our own to maintain that constant flow?

Luke Pollard: I agree with my hon. Friend. I want to see reform of our procurement system to ensure that it is sufficient and agile, and, dare I say it, more cost-effective than it has been to date. That is why I am arguing for a medium-term strategy. The steps that we have taken so far have been important, but, rather than just considering the immediacy of the situation, we need a longer-term look at what we need to do.

Jonathan Edwards: Following on from what the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) said, I, too, believe that it will be a long-term conflict. Does the shadow Minister agree that, on top of the containment strategy that we will have to have in place for Russia, we will also need a strategy that offers Russia an alternative path for the post-Putin era, whenever that comes, so that it can resume normal international relations if it respects its neighbours?

Luke Pollard: It will be a very hard way back for Russia if President Putin remains in power. The off-ramp option that was spoken about in the early days of the war is now very difficult for President Putin to consider, but in discussing future options for how the war can end, we need to make it very clear that the war will end only when Russia leaves Ukraine in its entirety and returns Ukraine to a peaceful situation in which its people can make their own decisions.

I realise that time is passing, so I will briefly raise the Homes for Ukraine issue. There has been enormous support from the British people in opening up their homes to people fleeing Ukraine. My boyfriend and I have signed up to the Homes for Ukraine scheme, but without a matching service, it is difficult to ensure that we can fill our spare room. There are tens of thousands of people in a similar situation.

Janet Daby: The cases coming to my attention in my constituency involve families waiting for up to two months for visas for the Ukraine family scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme. That is unacceptable. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Home Office must address that matter, as well as the issue of staff having to wait up to two hours on the phone to get through to the Home Office?

Luke Pollard: All of us in this place will have seen the queues snaking around Portcullis House. Our parliamentary staff, who have an awful lot on their plates regardless of whom they work for, are sitting in a queue to try to get answers out of the Home Office system. It should not take an intervention by a Member of Parliament to make the system work properly. It should certainly not take hours and hours of our staff's time to try to get a decent answer. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is in his place and will have heard what I have said. We wish him luck with fixing this broken system. At the moment, it is not delivering on the promise made by him and the Home Secretary of a swift, efficient system to help people fleeing conflict to get to a place of safety and to get there quickly. There are people now who question how long it will take for families to get here, and that even includes those who have contact with a Ukrainian family. We need to ensure that the system works.

In Plymouth, we have families across the city who want to take up the offer, but they are waiting for that matching service. I pay tribute not only to those families, but to our schools, our health services and our mental health services across the country who are assisting Ukrainian families and individuals who have been fleeing such difficult circumstances.

Geraint Davies: I was in Lithuania with an all-party group. At the reception centres for refugees, women were coming in with children and were being processed within 12 hours. They were simply given biometric and other checks and then associated with a family, with a kindergarten and with work, and then they were done. They were regarded as friends and as people helping in the workforce rather than as Russian spies. The men were put in another place, because they were expected to fight.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for that intervention, which prompts me to say to the Minister that the generosity of the British people needs to be matched by the generosity of our immigration system, especially for our friends fleeing Ukraine. At the moment, they do not match up as they should.

Labour stands unshakably with our NATO allies on the eastern flank next to Russia; we stand unshakably with our Ukrainian friends, and we will continue to do so during this brutal invasion. We need to make sure that we are supporting them in any way we can—indeed, the support required must now go much further than just military matters. I am grateful to the Minister for Defence Procurement for setting out the support that has been provided to deal with the hideous number of war crimes and the long-term consequences of the Russian military's using rape as a weapon of war. There are considerable long-term consequences for women in particular in Ukraine who have been abused by Russian forces, and we must ensure that there is long-term support, not just to prosecute those responsible but to help the communities of victims of torture, murder and rape.

Had time allowed, I would have spoken about the need to provide more humanitarian assistance and about food security. Food security is national security. As a Parliament, we must do much more to improve our own

national food security, and also recognise that Ukraine's grain exports in particular support some of the most vulnerable and fragile countries in the world. We must ensure that Ukraine is able to export its grain. That is not just a Ukrainian priority but a global priority.

The Opposition continue to support the Government in their measures to support Ukraine, but there are improvements that need to be made if we are to have a successful long-term strategy of continuing support for our friends there.

4.6 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a real pleasure to participate in this important debate. I begin by commending the Ministers on the Treasury Bench for the regular drumbeat with which they bring this subject to the House to allow us to understand what is happening, to take stock and to comment on the clearly very difficult situation in Ukraine.

If invading Ukraine was an effort to rekindle Russian superpower status, it has been a complete flop. There was no clear initial strategy, no effective command and control, no logistical support and absolutely no appreciation of the Ukrainian people's fearless desire to stay and fight. For Russia, this has been a dismal campaign. The body bags returning to Russia have piled up in their thousands, and dozens of wrecked Russian T-72 tanks now litter Ukrainian roadsides after a failed attempt to take the capital. With international sanctions starting to bite and countries such as Britain replenishing the arsenal of the brave Ukrainian forces with NLAWs and the like, surely Putin knows he cannot win. But sadly, this is far from over. With little care for the accepted rules of war or even for the loss of Russian life, Russian forces have now regrouped in the south-west of the country and have begun bombing entire towns and cities from afar, carrying out barbaric war crimes to gain territory, specifically in the Donbas region, and exploiting the west's timidity about getting directly involved.

As NATO leaders head to the Madrid summit in June, there are lessons for the west to learn. Step back from events in Ukraine and we begin to realise that this is not just about Ukraine; it is another turning point in our history—indeed, in European security. We have had it quite easy over the last 30 years, since the end of the cold war, but the next few decades will be extremely bumpy indeed. State-on-state aggression is clearly back. If we do not help to put this fire out in Ukraine, it will spread to other parts of Europe, yet today it seems we are doing only enough to ensure that Ukraine does not lose, and not enough to guarantee that Ukraine can win. Putin may have misjudged Ukraine's resolve to hold ground and fight, but he was spot-on in believing that NATO would have no appetite for getting directly involved.

Putin's invasion did not come out of the blue. His vice-like grip on his own media has, over decades, convinced the majority of Russians that the west—specifically NATO—is a threat and must be confronted. He has publicly expressed a desire to regain control of those countries that were once governed by Stalin. And now, he is sidling ever closer to China, which shares Russia's disdain for western standards and values.

This is indeed a dangerous turning point in our history, and the threat picture is certainly beginning to change fast. I put it to the House that how we conduct

[Mr Tobias Ellwood]

ourselves over the next few months—how we regroup and how we choose to stand up to this growing authoritarianism across the world—could have major implications for how things play out over the next decade. I recall speaking when Parliament was recalled after we decided to withdraw from Afghanistan. I made the statement that our departure could well be the high-tide mark of western liberalism since the second world war. I fear that if we do not get Ukraine right, I might be right in that analysis.

If we are to do things correctly, we face three big tasks, which I put to the Minister today. First, on Ukraine itself, we must agree on what exactly victory looks like. Even in the debate so far this afternoon, there has not been disagreement, but there have been different views on what success actually is. For me, it is the flushing out of all Russian forces from mainland Ukraine—I park Crimea, because it is a more complex issue to be revisited at a later date. Ultimately, I encourage President Zelensky and the Ukrainian armed forces to clarify that that is what they want to do, because that then makes clear how we can fully support them.

There must be clarity of that mission, because there seems to be a little disagreement taking place across our European allies. France and Germany are suggesting that a chunk of the Donbas could remain in Russian hands. We need to agree what that mission is, because that then helps to define operations, tactics and the equipment that is required. Eastern Ukraine, for those not familiar with it, is open, flat, tank terrain. It is perfect for that form of mobility and firepower. That indicates the sort of equipment we need to give.

The second task—slightly bigger, and stepping back from Ukraine—is to rekindle those cold war statecraft skills and the ability to react robustly to events without assuming that we will lose control of the escalatory ladder and trigger a nuclear war when dealing with Russia. NATO, let us not forget, remains the most formidable military alliance in the world. It is no wonder Sweden and Finland both want in. Yet future generations may ask why NATO formally sat on its hands while a democracy on its doorstep was partially destroyed. Let us remember what happened in 1938 when we hesitated. Too often, we have been spooked by Putin's rhetoric. We should be shaping events, not reacting to them.

In fairness to the west and in particular to Britain, we have come a long way since our initial hesitance to answer President Zelensky's pleas for help. Thankfully, NATO allies are catching up with the scale of Britain's military support for Ukraine, which actually began way back in 2014. However, NATO refuses to formally get involved. It is consensus-driven, and it is clear that some countries do not want to lean forward. It is time therefore to form a coalition of like-minded nations, working together to better co-ordinate military support for Ukraine, increasing the quality and quantity of equipment and assisting with supply chains and training, all united by a mission to see Ukraine push Russian forces entirely out of its mainland.

We must be proactive in limiting the economic harm that Russia is causing. We should establish a humanitarian corridor around the key port of Odesa, so that the grain that much of the world depends on can continue to

reach international markets. That is in our interests, because it will help directly tackle the cost of living crisis affecting us here, too.

Our final task is to form a strategy to handle an ever-assertive Russia-China axis that is attempting to exploit our fragile world order. Putin would not have invaded Ukraine if President Xi had not given his backing and support. Both countries share a common goal of building an illiberal alternative world order where authoritarian states can flourish, and Ukraine is just the start of that new axis of autocracy flexing its muscles. We must recognise that the last 30 years have been a walk in the park compared with what lies ahead. All NATO countries must increase defence spending to a minimum of 3% and the recent cuts to our troop numbers, fighter jets and ship numbers must be reversed.

Jonathan Edwards: The right hon. Gentleman speaks with great authority and knowledge. Given the emergence of the axis between China and Russia, how concerned is he about reports of a joint military exercise in the last few days over the Sea of Japan?

Mr Ellwood: I look forward to the hon. Gentleman's contribution. I will focus on what happens in the European theatre of operations, but he raises an important question about the tilt to the Pacific, which was mentioned earlier, and what is happening in Ukraine. If we now recognise that Russia and China are working together, we must also appreciate that what Russia is doing in Ukraine is in China's interest, because it has kept us, Europe and the United States busy and distracted so we have not kept an eye on what is going on in other parts of the world. We need to recognise that we must lean into what is happening in the South China sea. I would like to see a development of the Quad—Japan, India, United States and Australia—with Britain and France being invited into that strategic partnership to look after and take a greater interest in the security of that part of the world. I hope that the Government will look forward to that in the discussions at NATO.

Geraint Davies: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the west has been very timid because of its fear of a nuclear reaction? On the evidence of Putin's threat, he said that if we imposed sanctions on him through SWIFT, that would be an act of war by the west, but then he did nothing. The Kremlin's position is that nuclear weapons should not be used unless there is an existential threat to Russia, and nobody is suggesting invading it, so should we not just get Putin out of Ukraine?

Mr Ellwood: There is no doubt that, when dealing with a country such as Russia that is armed with tactical low-yield nuclear weapons, which we do not have in huge numbers in our arsenal, we need to have a sense of caution. However, there would be a stigma attached to Russia using those weapons systems, and countries such as South Africa, Saudi Arabia, India and even China might stop sitting on the fence or supporting Russia and move away from it. Let us not forget that, as we saw in Mariupol, Russia can achieve the same outcome as a tactical low-yield nuclear weapon using conventional systems and without testing its friendship with other nations around the world by crossing such a threshold.

When I visited NATO recently, I asked what NATO's response would be. It could be that it is tucked away in an envelope in a drawer somewhere to be pulled out, read and acted on if such an event happens. I would like us to respond robustly, because it will take us into a new era of the character of conflict if we say that low-yield nuclear weapons can be used. If one is used in Ukraine, I would like every F-35 in NATO's arsenal to take out every single Russian asset on the ground, and I would like us to look Russia in the eye—yes, this would be a “Who's going to blink first?” moment—and say, “We will punish anybody who uses these weapons.” If we do not respond and we do not react, we again allow Russia to gain more confidence, be more assertive and, no doubt, use low-yield nuclear weapons again in the surrounding areas of eastern Europe. How would we respond then? Let us not forget the mistake that we made in Syria. We said that there was a red line on chemical weapons, but what did we do? We blinked. We must not do that again.

The integrated review was an important document. Its threats assessment was correct, but it was incorrect about the speed with which those threats were going to come over the horizon. It was also, as I am afraid we all recognise, tied to a peacetime defence budget. I offer my support in making the case not just that the world is more dangerous now, but that it will get even more dangerous from here. It will be not lull, mop-up, conclusion in Ukraine and then back to normal, but a new era of insecurity. If we want to lead as Britain has, we need to spend more on our hard power. The big NATO strategic concept document on operating together is about to come out, and greater demands will be placed on all members, including the UK. That, I hope, will be a useful opportunity to take stock of our own position—our numbers of armoured fighting vehicles, troops and so forth—to see how we might advance and revisit the integrated review.

European security is once more in peril. Our adversaries are in plain sight, but I fear that we are still a little in denial. We continue to hesitate, and Europe needs leadership. One thing I can say from visiting conferences and from being in America last week is how impressed much of the world is by how Britain has stepped forward, but there is so much to do. I repeat that Russia is now winning in Ukraine, and it is moving to the point where Putin can claim a success and stay in power. If he stays in power, this does not end in Ukraine. That must be very clear.

I seek support from the House not only in praising the Government's having leant in operationally but in recognising what we need to do strategically to see victory in Ukraine, put that fire out, humiliate Putin and let the Russian people decide whether they want to continue with that leader.

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

4.21 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is right that we take stock of events in Ukraine, which deserves our support and our continuing focus. I commending Ministers on the Treasury Bench for their openness in the debates we have had and about the

actions we have taken on Ukraine. The SNP is a firm part of the coalition in Ukraine's defence. We are a party that stands for international law and for self-determination, democracy and human rights, so of course we are part of the coalition in Ukraine's defence. Where I have supported the UK Government, I hope I have been vocal enough in doing so. The Ukrainians deserve our support, and I salute their bravery in defence of their homeland. Ukraine has a right to its independence, and a right to live without fear of, and without interference from, its neighbour. On that, we are all on the same team, and I am glad to express my support.

Much has already been said on Ukraine, so I will limit my remarks to a few specific points, which I hope I can rattle through fairly quickly. I was concerned that the UK was not making sufficient progress on sanctions, but I think we are there now. However, I have called previously for the assets that have been sanctioned to be seized and to go towards a Marshall fund for the reconstruction of Ukraine. I am glad to hear that that was discussed at the G7, but perhaps we could have some more details of where we are with that. I am conscious of the legal difficulties, and I am also conscious that Ministers are working on it, but I would like to see some progress.

On sanctions avoidance, when the SNP supported the statutory instruments bringing forward the sanctions, I raised concerns, particularly about the overseas territories. There was an assurance that the overseas territories would sign up to these sanctions and that loopholes would not be allowed to be created. I would like that reassurance again now that we are a few months further down the tracks on that, because we are dealing with some particularly slippery individuals, who are advised by the most slippery, and most expensive, professionals in this field. They will be quick to exploit a loophole if one exists, so I offer our support in closing them.

The SNP supports the provision of arms—if anything, we have called for more and faster provision—for Ukraine to defend itself. I would like some words from the Minister on what assessment has been made of the evolving nature of events in Ukraine. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) said, we see a much better supplied and better dug-in Russian force in Donbas, so there is a danger not of a frozen conflict, but of a conflict that does not go very far. What assessment has been made of the supply needs? In particular, there is the evolving situation in the Sea of Azov and the Black sea, which is so pivotal to exports from Ukraine—of food especially, but also of lots of other things—and to supply for Ukraine itself. How is the evolving nature of that threat being taken forward?

The biggest area of disagreement between the SNP and the Government is on refugees. I have long said that the UK should have done the same as the EU did: to waive visas, not to wave flags. The EU demonstrated what should have been done. It said, “For three years, if you are fleeing harm and fleeing Ukraine, come in. We'll keep you safe and we'll sort out the paperwork later.” That was what should have been done. I regret the decisions that the UK Government have made on that.

On the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the British Association of Social Workers has drawn concerns to all our attention in its useful brief, which highlights in particular the risks in the safeguarding of refugees and the proper checks that must be run on potential host

[Alyn Smith]

families. Safeguarding is not an optional add-on. Failure to safeguard is not simply an ethical issue; it is a false economy, because when hosting arrangements collapse, new hosting arrangements need to be identified. I have made my position on the Homes for Ukraine scheme clear, but let us ensure that it works and that it does what it claims. The association also makes the point:

“An effective Homes for Ukraine Scheme would have a government portal to match Ukrainians with UK hosts and undertake basic screening and would ensure hard pressed local authorities are properly funded to meet this humanitarian responsibility.”

I strongly endorse that and would be grateful for a response from the Minister. That seems like a sensible addition to the scheme.

On the wider implications of Ukraine, I was struck by the remarks of the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), about a turning point. It is rare for us to see a turning point as we are experiencing it—we usually see them in hindsight—but the world around us is changing right now and a lot of the assumptions on which we all based decisions have been upended. We are seeing a massive evolution of NATO and the EU in the light of events in Ukraine, with the NATO accession applications of Finland and Sweden. I am glad that the Government support them; likewise, the SNP strongly supports them. We think that they will be strong additions to defensive capabilities and we would like to see them integrated as soon as possible now that the Finns and the Swedes have made their democratic intentions clear.

On UK-EU relations, the EU's defence and foreign affairs capability has evolved at lightspeed in the last few months with the peace instrument, the strategic compass and the permanent structured co-operation growing arms and legs. There are an awful lot of developments in the EU that I would like to see the UK hand in glove with. I regret Brexit deeply and regret that the UK left the EU. I want to see Scotland get back into the EU—that is a discussion for another date—but, in the meantime, surely let us build on the good co-operation happening between the UK and the EU on defensive matters. Now is the time for a deep and comprehensive UK-EU security and intelligence treaty to formalise that co-operation and ensure that the UK is not left behind as the EU develops its own competences in that field.

A number of hon. Members have raised the issue of food prices. I draw attention to the sobering briefing given to us by the Red Cross, which says:

“The UN projects that a further 8-20 million people will now be left hungry from the knock-on effects of soaring prices and broken supply chains for grains, cooking oil, fertiliser and fuel.”

The UK Government, working with local and international partners, must look beyond the borders of Europe and act urgently to prevent a food crisis. That is global Britain's litmus test. Global Britain is not the SNP's project, but if we see serious action from the UK Government on world food prices, I will be the first to support them. For the best part of two decades—hon. Members can check my record in the European Parliament—I have been banging on about food security and the food supply chain, and I am deeply concerned that we are weeks away from a catastrophe for many of the most vulnerable in the world. We need to act together to fix it.

Many things have changed in the world. I echo the comments of the Chair of the Defence Committee on the integrated review. The SNP contributed constructive suggestions to the review, but surely we can all agree that it is now badly out of date and needs to be urgently refreshed and reassessed. We will continue in a co-operative spirit on that.

A number of things have changed about Ukraine, but the people of Ukraine deserve and have our support. I am glad to continue the SNP's constructive approach with the UK Government on this matter.

4.29 pm

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): Over the last three months, we have seen a war of choice in Europe. Putin and his close allies have revealed their callous and barbaric nature, plumbing new depths of human depravity and reaching new peaks of human wickedness. Putin has shown a casual and contemptible disregard for human life and a vile disinterest in the suffering of men, women and children as a result of the choice he made, suffering and death that we hoped we would never see on the European continent again. Putin has shown a casual and contemptible disregard for human life and a vile disinterest in the suffering of men, women and children as a result of the choice he made, suffering and death that we hoped we would never see on the European continent again.

A few weeks ago, I was speaking to young people at a university in Poland. There were Polish, Ukrainian and Russian students in the audience. They were bewildered, afraid and angry about what they had seen. It struck me that those young people had no memory of the Berlin wall, the cold war or the Soviet Union—all the more reason for us to repeat to them the lessons we have learnt from history—but what we have seen comes, or should come, as no real surprise to us. Putin told us who he was and what he believed at the Munich security conference in 2007. He told us primarily that he was in denial about the end of the cold war. He believed it had come to an end, rather than that the Soviet Union had been defeated. He said:

“we should not forget that the fall of the Berlin Wall was possible thanks to a historic choice—one that was also made by our people, the people of Russia—a choice in favour of democracy, freedom, openness and a sincere partnership with all the members of the big European family.”

If that was not utterly out of line with the reality of what was happening, I do not know what is.

Putin also made it very clear in that speech that he viewed NATO as an aggressor from the outset, when he said:

“I think it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have any relation with the modernisation of the Alliance itself or with ensuring security in Europe. On the contrary, it represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust. And we have the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?”

No expansion was intended; it was there as a defensive alliance. If there has been an expansion now, it is because of the threat posed to other European states. Putin has shown that he has been more than willing to carry out that threat in Ukraine.

There is something else in that speech that we should remember, which says something about Putin's values. He was talking about the unipolar moment. He said:

"I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but impossible in today's world... What is even more important is that the model itself is flawed because at its basis there is and can be no moral foundations for modern civilisation."

We knew from that what Putin was like. How did we get it so wrong? We did it because we in the west substituted wishful thinking for critical analysis. We wanted there to be a peace dividend, understandably, but we wanted it so much that we did not look at the evidence, in rapid succession, in front of our eyes. We had Chechnya, with Grozny razed to the ground in the way we see today in Donbas. The pattern of behaviour is clear. We then saw, in 2008, the invasion of Georgia and we did very little. We saw the annexation of Crimea. When I wrote in February 2015 in an article in *The Sunday Telegraph* that we should be arming the Ukrainians to stop Putin because they would be next, I was actually described by a senior member of the coalition Government as a warmonger. I am still waiting for the apology, but I guess it will not be coming. Now, in a bizarre and horrible echo of history, we see Putin willing to use the grain supplies that sit in Ukraine as a weapon of war well beyond the European theatre, willing to cut off the supply to the developing world who will starve if they do not get it, in an awful echo of what Stalin did in using famine as a weapon against the Ukrainian people.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Is it not the case that even on the verge of the invasion, when our intelligence sources made it clear an invasion was going to take place, many of our allies in Europe refused to believe it would actually happen?

Dr Fox: That is right. I will not dwell on that point, because I do not think it takes us much further forward, but there was again the substitution of wishful thinking for critical analysis. The evidence was there that the troops were being massed on the Ukrainian border. We knew there was an intent to use them and yet in a number of European capitals there was still the triumph of hope over experience. That lack of preparedness among some of the western nations put the Ukrainians at a disadvantage at the beginning of the conflict.

A number of Members have said that the sanctions on Russia cannot be lifted until all Russian troops leave Ukraine. I would go further: the sanctions on Putin and Lavrov and the architects of this war can never be lifted. That is a different question from what happens to the rest of Russia. Of course, there must be a potential new course in a post-Putin era, but our aim must be to increase the tensions within the Russian regime by making it clear that those who stick with Putin and those who are the architects of the war in Ukraine cannot escape from the sanctions—they crossed the Rubicon; they are war criminals. On the other hand, those who choose a different path for the future can have an alternative future. It is very important that our messaging is consistent and utterly clear.

Mr Ellwood: My right hon. Friend is linking the impact of sanctions to the military progress and what we should be doing on the ground; he is therefore in danger of coming close to having a strategy, and Britain, the west and NATO must have a grand strategy to deal with a resurgent, adventurist Putin.

Dr Fox: I am always very wary of compliments paid in the House of Commons as there is generally a sting in the tale. All I will say to my right hon. Friend is that I think we were guilty collectively in the west of wilfully misunderstanding what Putin was doing even when the evidence suggested otherwise. There will be no change in Putin: his behaviour will be repeated if we allow it to be repeated. That is why I agree with what my right hon. Friend said earlier in the debate: unless Putin is defeated in Ukraine, others will follow. That is the nature of Putin—it is the nature, literally, of the beast.

I want to touch briefly on the question of famine. The consequences of the conflict in Ukraine will reverberate far beyond Russia, Ukraine or even Europe. There will be people, especially in the developing world, who will starve to death if we do not get grain stores and other materials released from Ukraine. Putin is waging this war not just on the Ukrainians but on some of the most vulnerable people on our planet today. That is why I refer to the height of the wickedness his regime represents. We must do all we can; I will not go back over the points already raised on why we must if possible move grain through the port of Odesa. If we cannot do so, we must move it by rail to the northern Baltic ports to get it out. But, whatever we have to do, we have to do it together with our allies, because the consequences of failure will go well beyond our own strategic objectives to the suffering of people in this world who have already been hit post pandemic and are already facing supply shocks.

Another question raised earlier in the debate—it was a point also made recently by the Foreign Secretary—is that if Chechnya was crushed, then Georgia, then Crimea, and then Ukraine, what will be the next domino to fall? The next one is Moldova. We still have time to avoid the mistakes we made with Ukraine by ensuring that we arm and train our allies in Moldova who could well be the next target should Putin survive this adventure he is having.

NATO has, again, been referred to. We must ensure that we raise spending among not just the biggest nations in NATO but all nations in NATO. We must make it clear that countries that want the insurance policy have to pay the premiums for the policy as well. But we need to give this a lot more thought too, because we do not want unnecessary duplication of what NATO does, for example by a European Union force. We need to ensure, in procurement, that we are not duplicating and have wise policies across NATO. There has always been resistance in NATO to the idea that some countries specialise in some areas while other countries specialise in others. The bottom line, however, is that the United States is the only country big enough and rich enough to have a full spectrum of military capabilities. Others will have to choose wisely where they spend their money.

We in the United Kingdom provide NATO with a nuclear deterrent, carrier strike, our F-35s, our Tornados —[*Interruption.*] Sorry, our Typhoons; that was a slip back to 2010. We have our investment in space and cyber, but we cannot be expected to have everything. The countries who are more vulnerable to land attack must be willing to carry the burden of those defensive capabilities. They certainly cannot continue to take a ride on the American taxpayer in the way that they have done in recent years, because sooner or later—we had a warning with the Trump Administration—there will be an Administration who are not willing to carry that

[Dr Fox]

burden on behalf of European defence. We should regard current events as a very clear warning to us of what could happen if Europe is not willing to carry its defensive burden.

In commending our Ministers for the clarity and generosity of the briefings that they have given us during this conflict and the very clear leadership exhibited by the Defence Secretary and his team, we have to accept, painfully, that what we have seen in Ukraine is—at least to a large extent—a failure of deterrence, because given our lack of reaction to previous incursions by Putin, he believed that we would not act. We can console ourselves with the fact that we have acted and that NATO has been strengthened not just in its military co-operation, but in an understanding of its political nature. Our belief in democracy, the rule of law and human rights has been strengthened by the shared experience that we have just gone through. We have shown that we can, and are willing to, supply Ukraine with the necessary armaments to defend themselves, and we have shown our willingness to sanction Russia and its leaders in a way that we have never done before with a major economy, particularly through central bank sanctions. We must follow those positive developments through with increases in our defence expenditure and a much clearer idea across NATO of which roles are appropriate for which nations and where they need to invest in their procurement budgets. The final lesson for us is that weakness in any of these areas is no friend of peace—only strength is.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I briefly interrupt the debate to announce the result of the ballot held today for the election of a new Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. There were 474 votes cast with no invalid ballot papers—it is a relief that Members of Parliament know how to cast a vote. The counting went to four rounds. In the fourth round, 420 valid votes were cast, excluding those ballot papers whose preferences had been exhausted. The quota to be reached was therefore 211 votes, and the candidate who has been elected Chair, with 243 votes, is Sir Robert Goodwill, who will take up his post immediately. I congratulate him on his election. The results of the count under the alternative vote system will be made available as soon as possible in the Vote Office and published on the internet.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the officers of the House and the Clerks who carried out this election so efficiently and all those involved. I also thank my fellow candidates for the very good-natured way in which it was carried out. I thank all the people who voted for me, and I hope that I can carry forward the Committee and follow on from the excellent work done by my predecessor, Neil Parish.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I do not need to answer that point of order, but it was a perfectly reasonable one. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to thank the House. I also offer the commiserations of the whole House to all the other excellent candidates who took part in the fiercely contested election.

4.44 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): May I offer my warmest congratulations to the right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), the newly elected Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee? I have had the joy of being the Committee's interim Chair. *[Interruption.]* He is obviously slightly deaf and preoccupied. Anyway, over to the main issue.

We all condemn the unprovoked, barbaric and illegal attack on Ukraine. It is an attack on a peaceful people. It is a land grab targeting the natural resources of the biggest country in Europe other than Russia, including the uranium that this country may rely on for its nuclear ambitions and the grain that is feeding the world. It is an appalling attack on our fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. It also means a diminution of all our economic futures because of the cost of living crisis; the world economy is set to reduce by something like £750 billion this year.

I support sanctions, but let us be realistic: they are likely to shrink the Russian economy by 8.5% in the next year, according to the International Monetary Fund, but they will not stop a rolling Russian tank. Putin expected Ukraine to roll over, but thanks to the great bravery and solidarity of the Ukrainian people, the great leadership of Zelensky and the military support that has been provided from outside and inside, he has been resisted. Now is the time to look again at the balance of military and economic support that we provide, so that our ambition can be to drive Russia out of Ukraine and, possibly, resume relationships in future.

As we speak, Russia and China are reconfiguring their economic relationships in order to move forward, even in a world of sanctions. At the Beijing Olympics, they signed up to a deal under which Russia would provide some 10 billion cubic metres of gas per year from 2025, compared with the 1.25 billion cubic metres that it provides at the moment. More gas and oil is being sold to India and Indonesia. In Russia, the price of oil has been reduced so that food supplies can be transported more economically from the south to the north, for example, and logistics costs have been reduced to boost the manufacturing that has been denied through sanctions. Meanwhile, in Britain and elsewhere, energy prices are going up and economic activity is being hit. That suggests that we should continue to impose sanctions, particularly those targeted at Putin and his allies, but time is not necessarily on our side in supporting the military imperative to get the democracy and economy of Ukraine back into a healthy state.

When we step back and look at the track record of President Putin—invading Georgia, invading Crimea, taking control of Belarus—we can see that invading Ukraine is part of a wider plan. Finland is clearly in his sights; we welcome its application to be a member of NATO. Moldova has already been mentioned as vulnerable.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I offer my wholehearted support for Finland and Sweden's inclusion in NATO, and for the important work that NATO does on collective security. Does my hon. Friend agree that, on a parallel track, there should be much better support for refugees? The Government need to step up their support, particularly with respect to family reunification.

I have recently dealt with some very difficult cases in which families have been separated. May I ask my hon. Friend to focus on that point?

Geraint Davies: I am grateful for that intervention. We are not just talking about economic costs and sanctions; the main cost of this war is the loss of human life, and the 5 million refugees who have left Ukraine. There is a lot of talk in this place about the need to stop people getting into boats and crossing the channel, but we are simply are not doing enough for those 5 million Ukrainians.

When I visited Lithuania, I went to centres at which hundreds and hundreds of people were arriving each day. People—usually women with young children—were processed within hours. Biometric and basic checks would be done, and then the individuals would be associated with a family, a kindergarten, work and so on. I talked to the head of the civil service about immigration and refugees, and she said that they regarded those people not as refugees, but as friends or part of their family, and as a support to their labour market. In Britain, the view tends to be, “Hold on, what about the cost to the health service, education and so on?” That is despite the fact that we have labour shortages, as 1.4 million Europeans who were registered to work here have stayed in Europe. Obviously, we should open our hearts and homes to the people of Ukraine, who share our values. We share their suffering, and we should support them in every way we can. Not enough is being done, and we need to do much more, much more quickly and effectively.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern about the discrepancy between refugees taking part in the Homes for Ukraine scheme, for whom funding is available, and those involved with the family visa scheme, for whom it is not? There is an assumption that people who arrive on family visas will be funded through their families, but not all families are the same. Some people are brought over by grandparents, and they now have to carry the costs themselves. I think the Government have already been asked to change that inconsistency, and it would be wonderful to reiterate the question of why refugees are treated differently depending on the route by which they arrive.

Geraint Davies: The right hon. Lady makes an excellent point, which I fully concur with. Frankly, the reason for this discrepancy has been the mean-minded culture in Britain—the idea that we somehow have a refugee problem. Across Europe, we are 17th for the number of asylum seekers we take per head of population, and fifth overall. It is not as if we have a huge burden. In Poland and elsewhere—I have mentioned Lithuania—there is a massive burden of people coming over. A lot of them are in a state of psychological flight, and they think, “Actually, we want to go to Britain.” Getting to Britain is being made out to have been made easy, but it has not. People are taking months, not days, to get here, and that should be resolved straight away.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is deep concern about reports that Ukrainian refugees are becoming homeless after falling out with hosts in this country? There is a problem not only with the matching of Ukrainian refugees and their hosts, but with maintenance. We are not checking

that those refugees—they are incredibly vulnerable, and many of them are women—are safe when they get to this country.

Geraint Davies: The hon. Lady makes a critical point about the need to follow through on the association with families to ensure that sufficient support is provided, and that those who are received are safe and secure. The Government may need to put their hand deeper into their pocket to ensure that people are given a safe haven, and that these matches are made properly. More resource might be needed in the Home Office to facilitate that. It comes against a backdrop of other members of the Government saying, “We need to slash arbitrarily 90,000 people from the civil service.” This war, alongside other changes, means that more public management will be required for our own security and the safety of the people who come over, and I welcome the point that she makes.

I was saying that we need to co-operate more across Europe. We have the facility, and we have taken leadership in terms of unilateral action and military support. We need to be closer to our European allies who share our fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, in order to get them to raise their game. Germany has now said that it will provide support, but there is a lot of talk in both France and Germany along the lines of “We had better give Russia a bit of this,” and “Maybe we should just settle and give them a bit, as we did with Crimea.” As has already been pointed out, we do not want allow the creeping, partial success of Putin. It is something that we want to work against, alongside our allies. I am a member of the Council of Europe, which shares those fundamental values. Russia, of course, was a member, but we ensured that it was ejected for a clear breach of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. I should like to see a route map showing that, at some time in the future, Russia will readopt those values and come back into the fold, rather than permanently being driven, along with China, into a partnership that pushes us towards a more totalitarian way of thinking globally.

This is a time of reckoning. There have been debates about how we can integrate economically with people who do not have our interests at heart when it comes to, for instance, supply chains or the Uyghurs, and this is a time to stand back and think about our global strategy. Obviously, we would all like to be able to secure respect for human rights, get the Russians out of Ukraine and have an economic co-existence that made sense, but sadly, we have recently seen the use of gas and grain as instruments of war; and we have seen sanctions used in China as well. We need to think in an integrated way about how to move forward. However, in the very short term, our focus and resolve must be concentrated on supporting Ukraine in delivering the democracy, the sovereignty and the working economy that it naturally craves.

4.56 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): In the relatively short time that I have, I will make a few general points. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), and I agreed with much of what was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). This cold war started in 2007 with

[Bob Seely]

Putin's Munich speech. It was a great shame that the political classes both in this country and elsewhere in the European Union did not take that to heart; we have been paying an increasingly high price ever since.

I want to talk about the potential speed of the Russian collapse and what that may mean, and about the nuclear threat, but first I will mention some issues involving kit. A few weeks ago I was in Odesa, talking to the regional governor and members of the county council. They had been trying to buy medical kit from this country—they were not looking for freebies—but they found the export licences very difficult to obtain, although this was medical kit. They were also trying to purchase body armour. I wrote a letter to the Secretaries of State for Defence and for International Trade, and perhaps I could ask one of the two Ministers who are sitting on the Front Bench to follow up on that letter. I would like an answer, simply because I was asked very directly about kit.

Let me raise the more general issue of the southern front, which I think will be a very significant inflection point, and a decision point for both the Ukrainians and the Russians. Everyone is saying that this will be a long war. I am not quite sure that I buy that, because I have always distrusted conventional wisdom. I lived in the Soviet Union back in 1991, and the conventional wisdom was that the Soviet Union would not collapse. That went well. The conventional wisdom was that the nationalities issue was not a problem in the Soviet Union, when it was actually one of the critical factors. Now the conventional wisdom is that this will be a long war. I am not saying that that is necessarily wrong, but the Russians got this war wrong. Even our Ukrainian friends got it wrong. They were saying to us, "Look at doctrine. Russia does not have the kit or the personnel. It is not going to do anything until August this year." Well, our Ukrainian friends were wrong, and the Germans and the French were wrong in saying that the Russians were not going to invade. We got it right, but then we did not expect the Ukrainians to survive. The battle of Kyiv was won, when we expected it to be lost. The battle of Kharkiv is now probably coming to an end as the Russians pull back and can shell increasingly from a distance. I was talking to a Ukrainian MP from Odesa just two days ago, and the Russians are digging in around Kherson to defend their territory.

The Russians are now making some gains on the eastern front, but I question how long that will go on. There is a considerable chance, given the amount of kit that is coming into Kyiv and being spread throughout the country, that an eastern front will stabilise. The question then is: how likely does a Ukrainian counter-attack become? Kyrilo Budanov, the head of Ukrainian intelligence, said that Ukraine was going to be ready for a counter-offensive in August. The critical question for me at this point is whether that counter-attack will simply be in the east of the country or whether it will be on the southern front. When I was talking to the commander of the southern front near Mykolaiv about two weeks ago, he told me that they did not even have armoured personnel carriers in which to put their commanders for units to attack on the southern front. It is clear that if the Ukrainians can open up a second front to the south, challenge the Russian positions

around Kherson and push through to break that land corridor, there would be a real danger to Russia of a wider collapse, and a growing ineffectiveness of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

The Russians are continuing to push forward and threatening Severodonetsk, but I think there is potential, come September, for a significant Russian fall-back and significant Russian damage. When we talk about Russian conscripts coming into the war, we have to remember that it takes at least six months for conscripts to be made ready and trained on kit. We have already seen how badly treated and undermotivated they are. Meanwhile, the Ukrainians are training increasing numbers of their own people to go forward, and they now have the kit as well. It is absolutely true, as some of us in this country think, that the Ukrainians have not yet quite mastered combined arms, when it comes to the broader kit that the Government are supplying.

The Government are doing a great job, and the Secretary of State for Defence is doing a wonderful job of effectively being the external quartermaster for the Ukrainian army. I congratulate him wholeheartedly on his role in trying to find NASAMS—national advanced surface-to-air missile systems—air defence kit, planes and tanks. What the Ukrainians say they desperately need now are MLRS—multiple launch rocket systems. These are guided artillery systems that can strike at 30 or 40 kilometres. The significant problem up to now is that the Ukrainians have had only Soviet-era artillery, in the form of the 152, which has a range of approximately 25 kilometres. Now they have the 155, they are able to mildly overmatch the traditional artillery of the Russians, because the 155 has, all things considered, about 5 kilometres of further range. So the Russians are either pushing back or having to go deeper, in which case they expose themselves further. If we can supply MLRS, that will make our position considerably stronger.

Having said that, there is clearly a danger. I take seriously what the Russians say about a nuclear threat. Some of it is undoubtedly bluff. In 2016, the Russians threatened Denmark with a nuclear response if it took part in the American nuclear missile shield. That was bluff. The threats to Finland and Sweden are almost certainly bluff. But, to my mind, there will be six decision points within the next six months where Putin will go over and have to consider whether to use nuclear weapons. There is absolutely no guarantee that he would, but if Crimea were threatened, I think we would start to live in extremely dangerous circumstances.

Those six points are: the collapse and withdrawal of Russian positions around Kharkiv; the collapse of the Russian advance in Donbas, which has not yet happened but may do within the next two or three months; the eventual collapse of new Russian positions this summer; the collapse of Russian positions in Kherson, where they are currently digging in; the entry of Ukrainian forces into the separatist Donbas republics if the Russians start to lose the territory they seized in 2014; and the potential entry of Ukrainian forces into Crimea.

Will Putin use tactical nuclear weapons because of the collapse on the Kharkiv front? No, because it has not happened. Would he be tempted to use nuclear weapons if he were losing Crimea? I am not sure I would want to take that risk, and I cannot answer that question, but I think there is a significant likelihood. The bigger question is: what happens when the Russian land corridor collapses come September and October?

There is a fine line between a Russian victory, which clearly nobody wants, and a Russian collapse, which may become a decision point for a series of catastrophic moves by Putin, the beginning of a significant weakening of the Russian position and its loss of dominance in the Sea of Azov. Looking at the map, the Sea of Azov is on the right-hand side of what was called Novorossiia, the Russian-speaking territories that are fighting just as hard as the rest of Ukraine. That is the point where, for an optimal outcome of this war, they start to negotiate because Putin will try to keep some of the land he has gained. As everyone has said, that is a decision for the Ukrainians and we in this country should not be armchair generals.

When I spoke to some American diplomats a few days ago, I was relieved to hear that they are thinking through and wargaming these very dangerous scenarios. I very much hope the MOD and the Foreign Office are, too. NATO, as far as I can see, does not wargame this because it does not have nuclear weapons, but we and the Americans do, and I hope we are wargaming these scenarios.

I am worried not only because of the big decision-making points but because, first, the use of nuclear weapons is justified in Russian military doctrine where there is an existential threat to the state. Nobody in their right mind thinks Russia is existentially threatened. However, the Russian narrative and the Russian media portray this war as an existential threat to Russia and a defensive war because Russia is trying to seize its territory from NATO. Whether we like it or not, it is being presented as an existential threat.

Secondly, there is a debate about whether the Russians will escalate to de-escalate. They might use a nuclear weapon to try to de-escalate. That is not Russian doctrine—I certainly have not seen it in the Russian doctrine I have read—although there is writing to say that this is some of the thinking.

Thirdly, it is absolutely true to say that the Russians take a very different approach from the rest of the world to nuclear weapons and nuclear war. The Soviets always saw nuclear war as fightable and winnable, which is why they built bomb shelters in so many cities. They do not necessarily have our mindset, which worries me because I think we look at them through our own mindset. We do not understand them on their own terms.

Finally, it is sometimes overlooked but highly dangerous that human beings and nations get trapped by their own narratives. Those of us who have listened to and watched Russian TV over the last five or 10 years know there is a normalisation of the idea of war, including nuclear war, with the west. That is why Russian polling since 2018 shows that something like 50% of Russians polled believe that war with the west is inevitable, and a large number of them believe that nuclear war with the west is inevitable. We are dealing with a different mindset and with people who have been propagandised for 20 years. That is also a danger with China, but it is certainly a danger with Russia.

Do we think that, by our logic, nuclear war is likely? No, because nobody thinks there is an existential threat to Russia—the war is an existential threat to Ukraine but not to Russia. However, in the narrative of the paranoid, conspiracy-driven mindset of the Russian media, which is reflected in the Russian leadership, there is a sense of an external, existential threat, if only to the incredibly

amoral, incredibly foolish, Sovietised, sort-of bastardised Slavophiles who are currently running Russia and who see paranoid conspiracy theories in every pothole in Moscow. I say that as a word of warning, because we are dealing with people who think very differently from ourselves.

I respect my right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America and my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Procurement. They have been absolutely superb. We need to see a Russian defeat. At the same time, we need to remember that this is not Berlin in 1945. Limited wars end in negotiation and, whether we like it or not, there will be some kind of negotiation at the end of this war, otherwise it simply will not end. We should remember that.

I agree with what has been said about the integrated review, on which we need a rethink. The integrated review was a good document, but it did not look enough at deep strategy. It brought together all the policies around a theme, but it could have been better. We now need to look at it again. I agree with what many people, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) and the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), have said about not cutting back on defence spending. Cutting back on defence spending would not make any sense and would not be logical, because we will need that defence spending to confront the Chinese threat or the Russian threat.

I wish to make an additional and important point that has not yet been raised, which relates to the national security strategy. Our national security structures are not fit for purpose, and I personally do not think the National Security Adviser is up to the job. I listened to him in Bahrain a couple of months before the war started and he basically said, “Look, climate change is the biggest threat to humanity.” This was in a city that had Iranian weapons pointed at it, in the week when the Chinese were wargaming over Taiwan and in the month when the Russians were building up over in Ukraine. My somewhat flippant response is, “Try doing climate change in the nuclear winter.” The avoidance of state-on-state warfare is still the short-term and medium-term primary aim for this state. Yes, global poverty is incredibly important, as is getting the grain out, however we manage to do so, and I am not dismissing climate change for one second, as it is incredibly important, but it is difficult to tackle climate change and to reach out to states such as Russia and China if we are at war, close to war or in confrontation with them.

I wish to make a final point about ceasefires, because it is important. There is a slight shattering in the western response currently, and we see a slight foot-dragging from not only the Germans and French—this may be surprising—but, potentially, from the US Administration. I well recall, as I was there at the time, that in Georgia the Russians used ceasefires very effectively to solidify their control of the territory they had taken. Again, this summer we are probably going to see a concerted attempt—this is already happening because the Russians are hinting at it—to get the French and the Germans and others to press the Ukrainians for a ceasefire now. Everyone will say, “Stop the war”, because, obviously, there is an overpowering moral and humanitarian argument there, but the reason the Russians would do this is to solidify their control over the ground they have taken. If the Ukrainians are wobbling on this, we need to say to them,

[Bob Seely]

“Clearly, you must do what is right, but we must remind you that the Russians have a very aggressive negotiating strategy, that they negotiate ceasefires, as they did in Georgia, often in bad faith and that one of their war aims will be to grasp, solidify and Russify—handing out passports, as we see happening today—those areas that they have taken.” Indeed, the Estonian Prime Minister has said that it is important that we do not get a bad peace. A ceasefire this summer, as attractive as it sounds, would, without further Ukrainian gains, result in a bad peace, further warfare and further bloodshed in the future.

5.12 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I want to highlight a case my office is currently handling, in the hope that the voice of the young girl I am about to tell you about will finally be heard. I am grateful that the immigration Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is in his place to hear this. Nataliia is 15 years old. When war broke out her parents made an impossible decision in order to keep her safe—this was a decision no parent ever wants to have to make: so that their daughter could reach safety in the UK and start a life away from the conflict, they handed over legal guardianship of Nataliia to her mother’s cousin, Millena. The pair then fled, hoping to reach the UK under the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

Millena’s visa was approved in mid-April, but Nataliia is still waiting for hers. Unbelievably, I understand that Nataliia’s guinea pigs have been given the green light to enter the UK by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, but their 15-year-old owner has not. I will not go into the ins and outs of every failing in this case, as I would be here literally all day, in the same way my team has been, when on hold to the MP hotline or when writing to the latest contact the Home Office has directed them to. What I will say is that it is clear that the Home Office has not provided the UK Visas and Immigration team with the resources they need to handle these cases in the right way.

Millena and Nataliia are running out of time and money. They are currently in Budapest, having travelled from Moldova. They cannot wait there indefinitely, and sooner or later Millena is going to have to make a similar impossible choice to the one Nataliia’s parents faced. She can come to the UK, but Nataliia cannot join her. That means that this 15-year-old girl faces two options: sheltering at a refugee camp or returning to the warzone. This is a disgrace. She is a child, vulnerable and needing protection. She cannot be left to fend for herself. I ask colleagues across the House to bring to mind any teenage girls they know, perhaps a daughter, a niece or a family friend. I ask them to think about what it would mean if she were left alone in an unfamiliar country, with no family, unable to speak the language, and with no means to support herself.

I have written to the Minister for Refugees, Lord Harrington, about the case, and I hope with every fibre of my being that Nataliia’s pleas are heard. I hope Ministers will do everything in their power to ensure that, moving forward, no child finds themselves in such a situation. I do not place blame on the civil servants who are working hard day and night doing everything

they can for Ukrainians who are trying to reach the UK, but nor do I accept that Ministers have done what they can to resolve the situation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): I hear what the hon. Lady says, and I will not go into the specific differences in respect of children travelling without their parents or closest relatives, but I am certainly happy to pick up and look at that case.

Margaret Ferrier: I welcome the Minister’s intervention. I am really pleased to hear that because I want to fix the situation for Nataliia.

Let me leave the House with the letter that Nataliia wrote to plead her case—not that a child should ever feel that they have to do that. I want Ministers and Members to hear, in her own words, what the situation feels like to Nataliia. It is important that she has a voice and can tell Members herself. She says:

“Hi there! My name is Nataliia, I’m 15 and I’m from Kyiv.

I spent the first two months of the war near Kyiv with my grandmother. It was really scary to be there. I saw destroyed houses hit by a rocket, I saw dead people, I saw tanks and machine guns. I felt what it’s like when your house is shaking from the bombing, when you’re sitting in a shelter and just hoping it wouldn’t get hit, when you sleep fully dressed and with the lights on, to get your stuff quickly and go to a safer place.

It was really traumatizing to read the news of dead children and understand that you are no different from them and you are just lucky. Or to hold your mother’s hand while trying to sleep, because you’re just scared to fall asleep. But almost two months ago, I applied for the homes for Ukraine scheme and I hoped that after a little while I would be able to get to a safe place. I got this chance from my cousin Millena. We spend a lot of time together every summer and, in general, I am very close to this part of the family...so I’m happy to go with her. I’m very comfortable.

A month ago I left Ukraine. Our travel was long and exhausting and since then I have been in Budapest. Now I check my mail every morning, and every time it’s empty. I never wanted anything so much. Every day my faith that I will be able to come decreases. Time is running out and I can’t wait for the visa any longer. I will have to return to Ukraine, return to danger, return and live again with the war outside my window. And I just started to get used to safety. I stopped being afraid of loud sounds and the noise of planes. I stopped listening to the sirens outside the window and thinking about the closest shelter I’ll be able to run to.

I really hope to get a chance for a peaceful life in a country I admired so much as a child and till this day. From the age of 8 I read everything I could find about Scotland and its traditions. I dreamt to go to this country as far as I remember. I’m feeling really connected and related to Scotland. Because of this, I believe that I will feel most comfortable in your country, while I can’t live in mine.

I can’t go home now. I can’t go back to war now. Please give me my visa. This is very important to me.

Thank you, Nataliia.”

5.18 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I compliment the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) on her moving contribution. After church last Sunday, while having tea and coffee, I met three young Ukrainian refugees. They were three females, probably in their middle teens. One could speak a tiny bit of English and the other two could not, but even talking with them in a limited way did not half bring home to me why we support Ukraine in the way we do. These young people were frightened,

but they were brave and had come to Scotland. I am sure they share some of the sentiments that the hon. Lady just read out to the House.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) has clearly researched this subject very fully and I was most interested in his contribution, which provoked in me a memory of when I went with other Members to visit the 3rd Yorks in Estonia before the covid pandemic. I remember asking the commanding officer—I do not think I am betraying any armed forces secrets here—“You have a huge Russian army group bang opposite you. What happens if the balloon goes up?” What he said to me was very interesting: “Well, there are several factors. The morale is not good among the soldiers opposite us. They see themselves as poorly paid. They are conscripts. And there is a slight problem with alcohol.” He also said that they were not the top-quality troops that we might expect. Have events in Ukraine not proved just how prophetic his words were?

I associate myself with other speakers and say that my party stands four-square with the Government in our efforts to support the people of Ukraine and to recognise their extraordinary courage and valour in taking on an army, which, harking back to what I was told in Estonia, some of us thought was invincible. That is not the case and that is why the thoughts of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight are useful.

Twice before in this place, I have raised the issue of the murderous legacy of the mines left behind in the north of Ukraine—and now, possibly, in the north and east of Ukraine—as Russian forces have retreated. My plea was then, as it is today, that we offer the maximum help we can in knowhow, kit and expertise to get rid of that murderous legacy. Alas and alack, a number of Ukrainians have been killed in their own brave efforts to get rid of this menace. I seek an assurance from the Minister—if not today then at some suitable point—that we are putting our shoulders to the wheel on this, because it is one way in which we can really help.

The horrifying images of Russian tanks exploding that we have seen online and on television show what is called “the jack-in-the box effect”. It happens, so we read, because of the method and manner in which ammunition is stored in the tank, which is why they explode in the fearful way that they do. My first thought is that we should check our own armour and how we hold our ammunition to make sure that there is no danger that we could fall into the same trap.

Arising from that is a reflection on the manner in which the Moskva, the flagship of the Russian Black sea, was sunk. We have all read varying accounts of American reconnaissance aircraft possibly being involved and what exact missiles were fired or not fired. If we think about two of our most precious military assets, namely our two aircraft carriers, we should look very carefully indeed at what happened to the Moskva. How exactly was it sunk, and are we sure that our defences for these priceless pieces of military hardware are absolutely up to scratch?

Let me give an example. Five years ago, in the summer of 2017, HMS Queen Elizabeth called in on Invergordon in my constituency, and some person light-heartedly, but irresponsibly, flew a drone and landed it on its deck. I asked the then Defence Secretary whether we could be sure that we were completely equipped to deal with that sort of thing. Had that drone, run by some person

having a bit of fun, been flown deliberately into the radar assembly, they could have disabled HMS Queen Elizabeth.

We have seen, harking back to Ukraine, the use of drones, not least in taking out Russian armour. Again, I say to Her Majesty’s Government that we need to look very closely at all the aspects of warfare and at what has happened to the Russians.

Bob Seely: I am listening intently to what the hon. Gentleman is saying about the how the Moskva was struck. Is he questioning whether the Neptune missiles destroyed it? Completely by coincidence, I was on the southern front in the air raid shelter the night the Moskva was sunk, and while I was waiting to go back on to the street in Odesa, a general showed me the pictures of the Moskva being sunk and explained it quite carefully.

The intelligence came from Turkish Bayraktar drones and it was two ground-based Neptune missiles that were used. The drones acted as a decoy. The Russians had been very sloppy in their drills—they were just sailing round in the same old pattern and not changing it. They were over-focused on the drones monitoring them, and that allowed the two Neptune missiles in. The Ukrainians themselves are absolutely adamant, and that evening they showed me the pictures of the strike on the ship. I hope that provides some useful clarity, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right in what he is saying: big items can be destroyed very quickly, as we have seen with both tanks and aircraft.

Jamie Stone: There we have it again—an example of the hon. Gentleman’s knowledge of and great interest in this subject, and I thank him for his intervention. It underlines and reinforces the point that we must look at all potential threats to our precious surface fleet, including the two aircraft carriers which will transform the United Kingdom’s defence capability.

I could stray into arguments about whether we should concentrate on the north Atlantic and the home waters nearby, and ask what we are doing in the far east, but that is not for today. However, no debate of this nature, when we are looking at ourselves, would be complete without my echoing the points about the cuts in the size of the British Army. At the start of the war in Ukraine, we saw extraordinary images of a Russian convoy of armoured vehicles and other vehicles essentially using a road or motorway. Having once upon a time served as a private soldier in the Territorial Army, I fell to wondering where on Earth was the infantry integration with armour? Why did the Russians not have, or appear to have, flanking troops in the woods on either side of the column? When we come to study what happened, we have to examine the Russian tactics and ask what has happened to the army that defeated Hitler, which now seems to be verging on incompetent? Maybe I am wrong—who knows?

Like other speakers, I thank the Defence Ministers. It was a generous move by the Secretary of State for Defence to invite a number of us to a gathering at Belvoir Castle to meet the Foreign or Defence Ministers of the Joint Expeditionary Force countries. I attended with the shadow Secretary of State and the Scottish National party defence spokesperson. Ever since then, that same spirit has prevailed; it is a co-operative spirit,

[*Jamie Stone*]

and I give credit where it is due. It sends a good message to our own armed forces that we are prepared to work together on these matters.

I remember well the talk at Belvoir Castle about Finland and Sweden possibly joining NATO. Sweden was represented at the gathering; I cannot remember whether Finland was. One could see what was developing to get us where we are today, with the application to join NATO. I strongly hope that they do join NATO. Having been to Norway—again through the armed forces parliamentary scheme—and seen part of the dreaded Bardufoss training that the Royal Marines do, I have seen with my own eyes just how committed the Norwegian armed forces are. They were very welcoming and work extremely well with us, so I think we have a great deal to gain if Sweden and Finland join NATO.

5.28 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I am sorry that the immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), is no longer in his place, because my principal motivation for coming along to this debate was to highlight some of the deeply frustrating, upsetting and challenging circumstances being experienced by constituents of mine in Angus who are trying to sponsor people on the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Of course, my situation in Angus is no different from that of MPs across the House who are trying to expedite that humanitarian assistance at a very human level.

The Homes for Ukraine scheme sits in stark contrast departmentally with the role of very hard-working Ministers in the Ministry of Defence, who have discharged their responsibilities with enthusiasm and efficacy and to great effect. I hope it is acknowledged that they will not often hear a comment like that from an SNP MP in this place, and I do not make that observation lightly. It is in sharp contrast to Ministers in the Home Office. That is not just a rhetorical observation or a political point—I genuinely wish it was not so, but it is.

The evidence is there for all to see in comparative analysis between what the United Kingdom has managed to achieve under the Homes for Ukraine scheme and what others in Europe have achieved where a Government's ambition has matched the ambition manifest in the communities of those countries. We see that in Ireland, which has given refuge to considerably more refugees per head of population than the United Kingdom. The same is true of Denmark, which has received one Ukrainian per 194 members of the population. In the UK, that is depressingly one Ukrainian per 1,249 members of the population. The United Kingdom has not even managed double what Ireland has achieved, and Ireland is 15 times smaller than the United Kingdom.

As if that were not bad enough, in answer to my written parliamentary question about unaccompanied minors trying to access the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the Home Office has confirmed that unaccompanied minors are only eligible if they are travelling to reunite with a parent or legal guardian in the UK. My constituents in Angus are suffering from the same predicament that was so eloquently outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) in regard to young people. In my case, it is two young

17-year-old boys. As she said, we all know 17-year-old kids. Can the House imagine what it is like being stuck in Budapest, alone and barred from refuge in the United Kingdom? It is to the United Kingdom's shame that that situation has been allowed to come to pass.

Unlike the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), I will not shy away from looking at the integrated review, because if we have learned anything over the past couple of months, it is that events have a terrible habit of catching up with us if we find ourselves in any way unprepared. If the United Kingdom prosecutes its integrated review in the way it has set out, it will have an Indo-Pacific tilt. It was never a great policy to begin with, in my view—it reeked slightly of a post-Brexit rebound effect, trying to get as far away from the European continent as possible, and before tensions required it, a bit like someone turning up at a party in the afternoon with their carry-out before anybody else is on the same page. That particular strategy did not merit being advanced before the events in Ukraine, and it certainly does not merit continued investment down that path since then.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member gives me the opportunity to enlarge on something I touched on. He is completely correct to say that we have to look carefully at where we should have our fleet and where we should be amassing our forces. I personally believe it is the high north and the north Atlantic—the bit opposite the top of my constituency.

Dave Doogan: A rare moment of accord between the hon. Member and I. He is absolutely right. If we look at the dysfunctionality of Russia's land forces in Ukraine, we can contrast that with Russia's sub-sea naval forces and secure precisely no comfort from thinking that that reads across. They are among the very best in the world, crewing some of the very best submarines in the world and deploying some of the very best tactics in the world. If we think that we can combat that threat in the South China sea, we are very much mistaken. That alone is an opportunity to quickly have a root-and-branch review of the integrated review.

The Minister for Europe and North America is in his place to reply for the Government. We have touched on the grain situation in Ukraine. It is not NATO's, the west's or Ukraine's responsibility, but humanity's responsibility to get that grain out of Odessa and into global markets where it can provide a lifeline—literally, sadly—to the poorest in the global community. If it is sufficiently, or even remotely, close to his area of responsibility, he might consider whether there is some mechanism that clever people in the Department for International Trade, or his Cabinet colleagues, could look at to forward buy the value of the grain in Ukraine so that it is already sold before it leaves. That would deny Russia the opportunity, however tenuous it might be, of saying that it is aiding the Ukrainian war effort with finance.

If the finance is already in place, that argument no longer stands and it will be evidence that, if Russia still blockades outward transit of grain from Odessa, that is purely a malign act of belligerence that will cost hundreds of thousands of people their lives. Getting the grain out would also vacate the silos and storage facilities in Ukraine so that they can receive this year's harvest and

not store up the same problem for years to come. It is vital that we co-ordinate the best ideas around that priority, so I look forward to hearing how we might do that.

5.36 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It has been three months—91 days—since President Putin began his illegal and unjustifiable invasion of Ukraine. I am sure that I speak for Members on both sides of the House when I say that I continue to be deeply moved by the bravery, resilience and spirit of the Ukrainian people. It has been excellent to hear contributions from right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House. The House is at its best when Members speak with one voice and send a clear message to tyrants and autocrats across the world of our commitment to shared values and our resolute determination to support Ukraine.

We heard a number of contributions. We heard frustrations with the Homes for Ukraine scheme from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) and other powerful voices, such as the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for Angus (Dave Doogan). I am sorry to say that I had a similar experience this morning when I was sitting in the Home Office area in Portcullis House dealing with people who have not been dealt with since March. I know the Minister for Immigration was listening and I urge Ministers to get their act together on that scheme. The British people have shown great will to support the people of Ukraine and our system needs to match that by living up to their expectations.

The right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) rightly spoke about the long-term implications of how we respond to this long crisis and the implications of our withdrawal from Afghanistan, which of course was heavily criticised this week. The right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) rightly said that we should have listened to what Putin said in 2007, but instead we all engaged in wishful thinking. He also rightly highlighted that Putin is now using food as a weapon of war. I hope that that is recognised by some of those around the world who have, to date, sat on the sidelines in some of the diplomatic votes and others. That is President Putin's agenda—he does not care about their populations and he is happy to let their people starve by stopping that grain being exported. That is the level of his wickedness. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) also spoke about those humanitarian consequences.

We have heard other powerful speeches. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) spoke of his engagement with the 3rd Yorks in Estonia. I am pleased to say that the Royal Welsh are there as well doing a fantastic job to hold up the eastern flank of NATO alongside our excellent Estonian partners. As ever, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) gave us the benefit of his expert knowledge and made an excellent and interesting contribution.

This war is a heinous and flagrant violation of international law, and it has been rightly condemned in the strongest possible terms across the world. President Putin's military failures in the initial stages of the invasion have morphed into wanton barbarity and destruction as this conflict enters a bloody new phase in violation of

all standards of humanity. We should, of course, not be surprised at that barbarity, as has rightly been said on a number of occasions; we only have to look at his history in Grozny, Aleppo and elsewhere.

President Zelensky has told us that, last Tuesday, 87 people were killed in a Russian airstrike on the village of Desna in Chernihiv. We have heard of bodies piled up and crushed under collapsed buildings, and we have seen the civilians slaughtered in the streets with their hands tied behind their backs. In Kramatorsk, Bilohorivka, Kharkivska and countless other urban centres in Donbas, we are confronted with a litany of atrocities that refute any of the Russians' attempts to skew the truth through their concerted information war. We know what is happening: we have seen those crimes being committed.

As of 20 May, nearly 4,000 civilians are confirmed to have been killed, but the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights believes this figure could be much higher. Despite fierce and courageous resistance by Ukraine and the remarkable Ukrainian efforts, particularly around Kyiv and Kharkiv, the invasion shows no sign of abating and the tide no sign of definitively turning. Indeed, in Donbas, particularly in the Luhansk oblast, the worst seems yet to come. Here, Ukrainian prisoners of war face the horrifying prospect of show trials staged by the authorities and senior Russian politicians calling for their execution.

The humanitarian situation is equally perilous. While it was a relief to see some women, children and elderly people evacuated from conflict areas, the plight of the Ukrainian people is more critical today than at any time in the conflict. The statistics speak for themselves: more than 14 million have been forcibly displaced; as I have said, almost 4,000 civilians have lost their lives; and 4.6 million now do not have access to safe and clean drinking water, while another 1.4 million have no access to water at all.

The sad reality, as in many conflicts, is that children in Ukraine are paying the highest price for this horrific war. The deputy director of UNICEF has told the UN Security Council that children are paying an “unconscionably high price”, with 239 confirmed killed and 355 wounded, although he believes the actual figure is far beyond that. Schools in Ukraine have been turned into mass graves—a true reflection of the evil driving this war. Older women make up two thirds of those aged over 65 and 71% of those aged over 75, and they are particularly vulnerable in this conflict, facing loneliness, hunger, sexual violence and killings. We heard earlier the estimate of 11,000 war crimes being committed—sickening scenes—and those responsible must be brought to justice.

I would therefore like to ask what recent conversations the Minister has had with the United Nations, human rights bodies and leaders of aid organisations relating to the situations facing particularly the women, children, elderly and vulnerable groups still in Ukraine. I have met many of those organisations in recent weeks, and indeed today I met UN representatives as well. I would also urge him to rethink some of the feared cuts that we see coming. I know there has been generous support for Ukraine, but this is really not the time for some of the cuts to multilateral agencies that have been suggested by the Government. The cuts also risk a diversion from other crises in which we see women, children and the

[Stephen Doughty]

elderly at risk, whether that is in Afghanistan, Yemen, Tigray or elsewhere in Africa, and I have spoken many times about the situation in Ethiopia. This suffering is not just in Ukraine, but is on a global scale, and, as we have heard, it will be exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine, particularly with the food and energy price shocks.

The situation in the Black sea has rightly been raised, and I hope the Minister can say something about what efforts we are making with others to open those routes for grain exports, and what assessment he has made of the alleged theft of grain by the Russian forces and their attempts to sell it on the open market. What steps are we taking to ensure that that does not happen and that money does not flood into Putin's coffers? What discussions has he had, particularly with Turkey, about potential assistance to ensure the safety of any commercial exports of that grain from Ukrainian ports?

Britain has a long and proud history of standing up to dictators and tyrants, and our defence of the values we cherish is needed now more than ever. Regrettably, it has taken us until now fully to appreciate the threat posed by Putin to our partners in Europe and beyond. To that end, I would like to reiterate the unshakable commitment to NATO of my hon. Friends in the Labour Opposition, and our support in providing all necessary assistance to the people of Ukraine as they heroically defend themselves. We also offer our support to others in the region, including Moldova, which has rightly been raised many times in this debate. We still have time to ensure that Moldova does not face a fate similar to that in the east and south of Ukraine.

I would like to put on record our clear support for Finland's and Sweden's applications to join NATO. Indeed, some of my right hon. and hon. Friends have travelled to Finland and Sweden, as they have to Estonia, Germany and many other allies in recent months. We welcome their willingness to stand with us in defence of democracy and the rule of law. Can the Minister say a little bit about what conversations he has had with Turkey in recent days on the worrying threats that seem to be emanating from there about attempting to block their accession? I certainly hope that that does not come to pass. We need to stand together as NATO in welcoming in Finland and Sweden, and those who wish to join.

The Government can continue to rely on Labour's unequivocal support for the steps that they are taking to reinforce the alliance and build on partnerships. However, it is clear that the war in Ukraine will fundamentally alter the European security order, so we need to work with our European allies across the board—whether EU or non-EU, NATO or non-NATO—to ensure the broadest possible coalition, and not, I am sorry to say, engage in unnecessary public fights in other areas. This is not the time to have those fights, as I made clear in responding to the Foreign Secretary the other day.

On sanctions, while I welcome the many steps that the Government have taken, and the willingness of the Minister and his officials to discuss them with me, at times we have been playing catch-up. I am glad to see that much progress has been made, but a series of things still needs to happen. A further statutory instrument is, I think, coming forward after the recess. There are still some loopholes in the sanctions; some trusts are not

fully covered, some ownership thresholds are too high, and some oligarchs have not yet been designated. Of course, we also need the fundamental reform of Companies House. I hope that the Government will therefore bring forward further measures urgently. Labour will support them, as we have to date. We have called for such measures for many years, both to deal with illicit finance and to implement the findings of the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report.

I press the Minister again on the seizure of assets. The European Commission has identified that it is considering repurposing such assets. On the legal thresholds for seizure and the potential use of assets, there was a decision today relating to the disposal of Chelsea. I understand that the proceeds will be used to help charities and organisations in Ukraine. Could we not go further with some of the other assets that we have seized and ensure that the money is used to support those who are suffering from the outcomes of Putin's barbaric invasion?

What are we doing to support others around Europe, such as those who are part of our coalition and bearing a significant brunt from implementing the sanctions? I have just been travelling in Cyprus, which has rightly joined the efforts against Putin's regime, but it has significant Russian influence in its tourist economy and financial sector. We must ensure that we work to support all those who are taking a hit as a result of being part of the coalition, as well as those in the western Balkans and elsewhere who are being targeted by Putin, and who may be destabilised.

We have heard in this debate, and in many others, about energy dependency and cutting off the decisive economic lever driving Putin's war machine. Many of us will agree that over-reliance on Russian energy has been a Europe-wide failure that has prevented the continent from acting decisively in opposing Putin's aggression. Radical and bold measures are needed to ensure energy security, bring down energy bills for working people across Europe, and release Putin's grip. We need unity, too. Will the Minister say a bit about reports that Hungary may be blocking Europe-wide measures? What discussions have we had to enable us—EU and non-EU countries across Europe—to move as one? What support is being given to those countries whose energy systems will take the biggest hit, for entirely understandable historical and other reasons? Fundamentally, it is only by transitioning with haste to clean and renewable energy, and supporting our allies and partners, that we will end our reliance on Putin's regime and, indeed, other autocratic and despotic regimes around the world.

The war in Ukraine has shown us the very worst of humanity, but also the very best—we have seen the response of the Ukrainian people and armed forces, and Britons offering up their homes. Putin seeks to recast Europe in a mould that fits his warped sense of nationhood, so that Russia and other despots can act with impunity and flagrant disregard for international law and human life. What happens will matter for decades to come—I am thinking not just of Russia's activities, but the activities of other regimes around the world—so Putin cannot be allowed to succeed.

President Zelensky has iterated many times that Ukrainians are courageously fighting not just for their homeland and freedom, but on behalf of all Europeans—and, indeed, all those who love liberty, freedom and democracy. The war will shape our continent for decades.

Our role, as it has been on so many occasions, is to stand for democracy, freedom and the rule of law. However, we must also complete the job of tackling malign influence in the UK, including that of kleptocrats and oligarchs. We must root out those who would use our City of London, and indeed our country, as a bolthole. We must also protect political and economic institutions, not just in this country but across the democratic world, from Putin's insidious interference.

The Government can continue to rely on the Opposition's support in going further and quicker, and being bolder, on sanctions and on the provision of military support and humanitarian relief. As has been pointed out in the debate, as this blood war continues and Putin becomes more frustrated, the UK and our allies will undoubtedly face more challenges. It is our duty to stand with unshakable conviction alongside our NATO allies and others in support of the heroic citizens of Ukraine, and in defence of all the values we hold dear.

5.49 pm

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): I am grateful to hon. and right hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions to the debate. In response to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and to other Opposition Members, let me put on record that the Government recognise and value the unanimity of voice with which we speak on these issues. There is, of course, always the opportunity here to engage in partisan and party political attacks. That is a part of the job that we do, and there is nothing wrong with it, but there are also times when we come together and stand shoulder to shoulder in defence of values that we all share. We have seen in this afternoon's debate a strong demonstration of this House speaking largely with one voice. Members are highlighting concerns, issues and problems when they arise, but are fundamentally standing shoulder to shoulder with each other, as is right.

The stoicism, courage and determination shown by President Zelensky and the Ukrainian people in the face of this onslaught is an inspiration to us all. If we are to realise a world where peaceful, sovereign nations are free to choose their path, and to prosper without fear of invasion, then Ukraine must win. We are working intensively with our allies and international partners to support our friends in Ukraine. The Prime Minister is in regular contact with President Zelensky. They spoke last Thursday and again on Sunday. The Prime Minister has spoken recently to the G7, European leaders, NATO and the UN Secretary-General. Last week, he was in Sweden and Finland to agree increased co-operation on security, and to discuss their application to join NATO. Meanwhile, the Foreign Secretary was in Germany to attend the G7—as was I, attending the G7 Development Ministers' meeting. The Foreign Secretary was also at the NATO Foreign Ministers' meetings, where she galvanised work with allies to help win the battle for Ukraine. As mentioned earlier by the Minister for Defence Procurement, the Defence Secretary met his US counterpart at the Pentagon two weeks ago. They spoke about the joint UK-US efforts to support Ukraine, including through the supply of military aid and the co-ordination of donations from other partners. The Defence Secretary is in Madrid for similar discussions with the Spanish Defence Minister.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) asked about replenishing the equipment we have donated and, by extension, NATO countries flushing Soviet-era equipment through the system, and replacing it with NATO-standard equipment. As he was speaking, I discussed that quietly on the Government Front Bench with the Minister for Defence Procurement, who assures me that we are in active dialogue with the defence manufacturing industry on those issues. I am not able to go into more detail at the Dispatch Box at the moment, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that his concerns are being thought about by the Government. We are discussing those issues to ensure that we can defend ourselves and our partners, not just in the here and now, but in the future.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) raised a number of incredibly important points about how we progress towards, hopefully, the end state of this conflict. I reassure him that we will be guided by the Ukrainian people on any negotiated settlement that comes about. We would not countenance their being forced into a conclusion to the conflict that they are not comfortable with. That would be counterproductive to the long-term peace and security of the continent, and for Ukraine. The UK is consistently pushing at the front of the pack in its support for Ukraine.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East mentioned relevance to the integrated review, and mentioned China's posture on the conflict. He highlighted conversations between the Russian and Chinese leaders; because of those conversations, the integrated review rightly places great focus on the Indo-Pacific region. The integrated review highlighted Russia as a major state threat actor to the UK—to our interests and the security of our friends and allies. I understand the points made by my right hon. Friend and a number of other Members about ensuring the IR is fit for purpose, and we will of course always keep our defence and security thinking up to date in light of what is happening in Ukraine, but the IR remains a strong foundation on which to build our defence, security, diplomatic and development policy for the period set out in it.

A number of Members spoke about sanctions. They are an important part of our response, but they are not the complete picture. The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) highlighted the importance of sanctions; we will continue to push them forward in order to hamper Vladimir Putin's ability to fund his aggression, and to isolate him and the cabal around him. I again put on record the Government's recognition of the work done by Opposition Members in meetings on sanctions-related statutory instruments. I have always found their views to be thoughtful; they are sometimes critical, but always ultimately have a desire to ensure that our sanctions packages are robust and effective, and that any attempt to circumvent them is curtailed.

Geraint Davies: That being said, does the Minister accept that each day that the war goes on comes at an enormous economic and humanitarian cost to the world that dwarfs the investment put in to help Ukraine defend itself and push back the Russians? Is there not therefore a compelling military, humanitarian and economic case for investing more sooner, so that we get this war ended and won sooner?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong point about the need to bring this conflict to a successful conclusion, with Ukraine winning. I was struck by the point my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) made about rushing to a ceasefire that might counterproductive for the Ukrainian people and an asset to the Russians. We will of course do everything we can to help Ukraine defend itself and expel Russia from its territory, but I urge caution to those in the Chamber and those listening to the debate: this conflict needs to be won, and won properly, if we are to ensure that we do not revisit these conversations for months and perhaps years to come.

The hon. Member for Swansea West raised the issue of circumvention and the overseas territories. I assure him that the UK sanctions regime applies in all UK Crown dependencies and overseas territories, either through legislation in those jurisdictions, or through Orders in Council. We of course work with our international partners to ensure that we prevent, as far as we can, circumvention and evasion of the international sanctions.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) was absolutely right to raise a point about international co-operation. I have no doubt that the collective response to Russia's invasion has been a huge disappointment to Vladimir Putin. Where he sought division and conflict, he sees instead solidarity, unity and resolve.

The hon. Gentleman asked specifically about the Black sea, and that plays into a number of points that right hon. and hon. Members made about food security. I was in Romania at the beginning of this week. Several issues that were triggered by the conflict on the Black sea coast because of Russia's attack towards Odesa were very much topics that I discussed directly with the Romanians and in other meetings, including the G7 Development Ministers meeting last week, when we talked about grain exports, food security and the ability to move the grain in ships through the Black sea. Sadly, I cannot give him the reassurance that he and others desire, but I assure him that that remains very much at the top of the agenda.

I think the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport made the point, as others have, that food insecurity is being used as a wider weapon of war. The message—this was reflected in his speech—that I would pass to countries around the world that are suffering from food price inflation, food shortage and food insecurity is that that is a direct result of Putin's invasion, and is not, as Putin would have them believe, any kind of response to sanctions. There are no sanctions on food or food movements. The shortages are a direct result of his aggression and nothing else. That said, we will continue to work with our international friends to do what we can to find export routes for that grain from Ukraine, whether that is by sea or land.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) spoke with huge clarity and great accuracy, sadly, about the warnings that were missed and the lessons that were not learned. I remember that, long before it was fashionable, he spoke and wrote about global insecurity, our need to defend ourselves against aggression and the importance of the UK thinking about these global trends. He still speaks with great authority on these issues. He made some important

points on sanctions and said that we must learn the lessons of what is happening now to ensure that we do not see aggression such as this again.

A number of Members raised the issue of sexual violence and rape as a weapon of war, including the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth. The evidence that we have seen is truly horrific and barbaric. Last month, the Foreign Secretary announced a £10 million fund that will help expert civil society organisations to work with victims of conflict-related violence. Earlier this month, my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General visited Ukraine for talks with its prosecutor general as part of our support for Ukraine's investigations into Russian atrocities. I assure the House that, in response to the barbaric tactics of Putin's forces—from levelling residential buildings in cities such as Mariupol to the slaughter, rape and torture of innocent civilians in towns such as Bucha—we will work with international partners so that those who have perpetrated or ordered such atrocities will be held to account by the international community.

We have led efforts to refer Russia's actions in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court. Those efforts have now secured support from 42 other countries. We have committed to providing the Court with the resources necessary to secure evidence and conduct prosecutions, starting with a contribution of £1 million.

Several hon. Members highlighted one of the by-products of Russia's aggression: Finland and Sweden's applications to join NATO. I make no apology for repeating my point about the unanimity of voice on the Opposition Benches with respect to the UK's support for NATO and our welcome for Finland and Sweden's applications to join. We need to bolster NATO's eastern flank. The Government welcome and support Finland and Sweden's applications; I do not want to do too much crystal ball gazing about this House's appetites, but I think it a relatively safe bet that whatever process it needs to take to facilitate their membership will happen quickly and with little disagreement.

Stephen Doughty: Can the Minister say whether he has spoken to his Turkish counterparts about the objections that they have raised?

James Cleverly: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that whatever conversations are necessary to ensure that Finland and Sweden successfully join NATO will happen. We enjoy a very strong bilateral relationship with our NATO ally Turkey; we will listen to whatever concerns it has and do whatever we can to address them, but I have no doubt that the UK Government will take whatever actions are necessary to facilitate Finland and Sweden's membership.

Hon. Members across the House have rightly raised the subject of Moldova, which is very much in our thinking. The partnership between the UK and Moldova is flourishing, thanks to the strong links between our peoples and Governments. Our bilateral agreement on strategic partnership, trade and co-operation provides a solid basis for developing that relationship. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made it clear that we will work to help Moldova to protect itself; indeed, at bilateral meetings in Romania this week I discussed our desire to support its self-defence.

Wider humanitarian need is a subject that concerns us all. Almost a third of Ukrainians have fled Putin's invading forces, and nearly 16 million are in need of humanitarian support. The UK will continue to provide humanitarian support to people in and outside Ukraine, and to countries that are supporting Ukrainian refugees. Hon. Members raised the situation with regard to the sale of Chelsea football club; we will ensure that any receipts from that sale are used to provide humanitarian support for those who need it, in Ukraine and more broadly.

I can assure the House that my hon. Friends in the Home Office have taken particular note of the individual cases that were raised. Hon. Members will understand if I do not speculate too much on those cases, but I assure them that notes were taken. If they feel the need to provide details that they were not able to furnish in the House—I understand that it is not always right to go into too much detail in what is a public forum—the Home Office will be more than willing to listen to their concerns.

The invasion of Ukraine helps to illustrate the power of free nations and the weakness of autocrats. Russia's assault on Ukraine was unprovoked, premeditated and barbaric, and as long as Russia continues to pursue its military objectives, it cannot be seen as willing to negotiate in good faith. While this is the case, the UK and our partners will continue to provide military, economic and humanitarian support to Ukraine, apply sanctions and increase international pressure on Russia. The UK and the international community stand against this naked aggression, and for freedom, democracy and the sovereignty of nations around the world. The UK and our allies will support Ukraine's effort to secure a settlement that delivers sustainable peace and security.

Putin has used his iron grip on Russian television to present to his people an alternative reality and fundamental lies about the motivations for his invasion, but the truth and the facts are clear. Putin thought that the Ukrainian people would roll over. They did not. Putin thought that we and the international community would lack the resolve to face him down. We did not. Putin has united Europe and NATO, and he has reinforced our shared resolve that Ukraine and the Ukrainians must win. With our continued support, I have certainty that they will.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Ukraine.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Pollution Prevention and Control (Fees) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 25 April in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953

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

6.12 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for granting me this debate on the operation of the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953. This is not just a debate about the operation of an Act or our campaign to make changes to it; it is a debate about the enduring pain of loss. It is about unimaginable heartbreak and how the Government can inject some humanity and empathy into this decades-old legislation.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate on such a sensitive and important issue, and for the early-day motion that she has tabled. Losing someone, especially a child, is traumatic and can often make someone feel that their life has suddenly spiralled out of control. Does she agree that this is about dignity for the families, and a final opportunity to regain control over their last goodbyes?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and I could not agree more. I will be echoing her comments later in my speech.

Last Sunday marked five years since 22 people were murdered in the Manchester Arena terror attack. My constituents Chloe Ann Rutherford, aged 17, and Liam Thomas Allen Curry, aged 19—a young couple deeply in love, full of hope for their futures—were brutally taken from their families in this attack. Since 2020, Chloe and Liam's parents have spent days in the public inquiry, listening to every agonising detail of that horrific night. As the inquiry sessions have come to an end, they have been told that, owing to the Births and Deaths Registration Act, they cannot register their own precious children's deaths.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. She is aware, I know, that I too have constituents who lost a child in those events. They have said to me that the lack of ability to register the death of their child has taken from them the last thing they felt they could do for her. Does my hon. Friend agree that reform of this provision would be a blessing for some of the families—although not all—who find themselves caught up in such dreadful public disasters, and feel that they are carried away with no control and no capacity to have an input in the final way in which their child is dealt with by the state?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank my hon. Friend for her powerful intervention. She is, of course, right: families need to be able to grieve, and they cannot grieve if they cannot carry out this final, official act for their children. Instead, the registration will be done on their behalf by a registrar, effectively a stranger, a person who never knew their children. As their mams say,

“Look in the mirror, look in your heart, and you tell me, as a parent, if it was your child, you would be happy with a stranger registering your child's death?

“It's the last thing we feel we can do as parents. As Chloe's Mam I want to be the person who gives that information, because it's personal and she's my baby”.

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

We have been told that the rationale for this arrangement is that it would be too distressing for the families to register their children's deaths, but it is surely not up to Governments or Ministers to decide what is and what is not too distressing for a family. Only a family can know how they feel. My constituents registered their children's births; they should be able to register their deaths. Being unable to do so is what is causing them distress. We have a two-tier system, in which those whose loved ones died outside such horrific events can register their deaths, yet those who are feeling a pain that most of us will never experience cannot. It is in the gift of the Government to change this legislation, to introduce choice for families and to let them decide whether they wish to register the deaths of their loved ones.

If you will permit me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to share some of Chloe and Liam's story with the House. Their story, and their family's pain, should help the Minister and those listening to understand the importance of the small yet very significant legislative change that we are requesting.

As a baby, Chloe was happiest swaddled and wrapped up in the love of her family, and Liam equally loved cuddles and being surrounded by the love of his family. Liam loved sport. He loved cricket, cycling and skiing. At just six years old, he picked up a cricket bat and never looked back, following in his dad's footsteps as a left-handed batsman. In later years, it was at the cricket club that he made friends with Scott, Chloe's older brother.

Chloe had always been a natural performer, her modesty making her talent even more striking. Chloe loved singing, dancing, playing the piano, ballet and tap. Being close to her big brother, she would sometimes pop along to the cricket, and it was there that she and Liam must have noticed each other, because it was not long before they started chatting to each other online. Dates followed, they fell in love, and their families were so happy that they had found each other. They said that they "were made for one another, at their best when they were together".

Their busy lives with work, study, sports and performing progressed in harmony, with Chloe at college and Liam at university, both also holding down jobs in the Hilton hotel in Gateshead. Liam's cocktail-making skills earned him the enviable title of "the Tom Cruise of the Tyne", while Chloe enjoyed the odd porn star martini and singing in her band, TwoNotes.

They also shared a love of travel. Chloe had an apprenticeship lined up at our local travel agent, Westoe Travel, and Liam was planning a future in the police force. Chloe and Liam had so many holidays planned—in fact they had planned their lives together, saving for a flat, marriage and children. It was all on the cards. In the words of Chloe's dad, Mark, there was

"so much living to be done, all the stories not yet told, all the dreams not yet dreamt."

Liam's mam, Caroline, said:

"Two beautiful young people with so much love in their hearts and hope for their life together. The greatest thing we ever learn in life is just to love and be loved in return."

On 22 May 2017, just eight weeks after Liam's dad, Andrew, had sadly passed away, Chloe and Liam went to see Ariana Grande at the Manchester Arena and

never came home. The lives of their parents Lisa, Mark and Caroline, their brothers Scott, Ryan and Zack and their entire families were shattered forever. These families have had everything taken from them. The whole inquiry process can leave people feeling powerless. As Lisa said, they feel like insignificant cogs in a very big wheel. To find that this one important final official act for their loved ones is denied to them feels cruel and heartless.

I sincerely thank the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove) for meeting me and my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), whose constituents also want the legislation to be changed. I also sincerely thank him for our meeting today with Chloe's and Liam's mams. I know he is in no doubt about how important this is and that he fully acknowledges how mentally exhausting and painful it is for them to be denied this choice. They and I know that legislative changes can take a long time, but we see no justifiable reason why this small change cannot be expedited, or at least why the families cannot be told whether it is possible. We have previously seen this Government rush through contentious and complex legislation for Brexit and covid, some of it in just one day. This does not seem overly complex or contentious, and I understand that it could be done through secondary legislation amendments to the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 and the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. When the will is there, the Government can and do act, and from today's meeting with the Minister I am reassured that the will is very much there.

Lisa, Mark and Caroline, in the time I have known them, always think of others. It is clear to see where their lovely children got their kindness, drive, intelligence and passion from, so it is not surprising that they used their pain and grief to set up the Together Forever Trust, which gives grants for sports and performance to young people so that their children's legacy can help others to achieve their dreams. So far, they have handed out 250 bursaries that have changed the lives of hundreds of children. These are families who always give; they have never asked for anything until now.

In our meeting today, Lisa spoke about how at the outset they were told that their children did not belong to them, and that they belonged to the state as a crime scene. She said that, despite the rhetoric we always hear about families coming first, they do not, but by making this change the Government can prove for once that families do come first. Caroline explained that registering Liam's death will allow her to begin grieving, and that if she cannot do this last thing for him, she will feel like she has failed him. Lisa rightly told her that she will not have failed him, as it is the state who has failed him.

I am convinced that the Minister will come good on his promise to the families that he will urgently look at whether and how these changes can be made, and I know that he will let us know as soon as he possibly can. South Shields is a small town with a big heart, and we are all pleading with the Minister to make this change, because Chloe and Liam will always remain in our hearts and minds, together forever. Their parents will never give up fighting for what is right for their precious children, and as their MP, I won't either.

6.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Tom Pursglove): I thank the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for securing a debate on this most difficult and sensitive of issues, and for the way in which she and the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) have approached the issue entirely constructively and in a spirit of wanting to resolve it on behalf of their constituents.

As the hon. Member for South Shields said, this debate marks the fifth anniversary of the terrible events at Manchester Arena, about which she spoke so movingly. I know the past few days have been particularly difficult for all the families caught up in that terrible tragedy. I know I speak for the House, and for the country as a whole, in saying that our thoughts are with them at this most difficult of times—I know it feels particularly acute as the anniversary is marked. Of course, our thoughts are also with those who were injured and with all those who responded so professionally and thoroughly on that terrible evening. We thank them for their heroic work in making sure people were safe.

I respond to this debate as the Minister responsible for coroner and inquest law and policy, but I am also privileged to be the victims Minister. It is in that capacity that I place on record my deepest sympathy and condolences to all those who lost loved ones or were affected by these shocking events five years ago. Their bravery is an inspiration to us all.

It is never easy to cope with bereavement in any circumstances, but I cannot imagine how difficult it must be to deal with the distress of losing a loved one—and, for many of those involved in the Manchester Arena tragedy, a child—in such shocking and traumatic circumstances. I pay tribute to the dignity and courage with which the families have faced their terrible losses and the subsequent investigations. As the public inquiry into these dreadful events continues, I take this opportunity to acknowledge the assistance and support provided to the bereaved, particularly by the inquiry team.

The chairman of the Manchester Arena inquiry has outlined that its report will be published in three volumes. Volume 1 was published on 17 June 2021 and addresses the security arrangements at the Ariana Grande concert. Volume 2 will examine the emergency response to the attack and what happened to each of the deceased. Volume 3 will consider whether the Security Service and counter-terrorism police could and should have prevented the attack.

The inquests into these tragic deaths are formally suspended pending the outcome of the public inquiry. Sir John Saunders, the chairman of the public inquiry, is also the coroner dealing with these tragic deaths. I assure the House that this is normal in such circumstances.

With the inquiry having completed hearing oral evidence and proceeding towards the publication of volumes 2 and 3, its chairman will, in due course, conclude his responsibilities as coroner for the victims' inquests. At that stage, he will provide the relevant information to the registrar to enable each death to be recorded in the death register in the appropriate way.

Maria Eagle: I thank the Minister on behalf of my constituents for his swiftness in arranging to see them tomorrow. They very much look forward to putting their points to him directly.

Does the Minister agree that it is natural for families in such circumstances, no matter how helpful the state has been to them throughout the public inquiry and the coroner's inquest, not to feel like a party to the proceedings, because they are not technically a party to them? Does he understand, therefore, how important it is for them to be able to come in at the end and do right by their lost children? That is the key to this. Does he agree that it is important that they have the choice? No one is saying that everyone should be forced to do this, but the families must have the choice. That is what is being sought.

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention. Again, I feel privileged to be meeting her constituents tomorrow to discuss this and to hear from them precisely how they feel these matters have been handled. Of course, I would expect the investigations team to handle this with extreme care, real sympathy and due regard to the victims' families, making sure that they are kept informed and that their needs are properly attended to. I hope that through what I am able to say in the remainder of my remarks, I will be able to provide her with reassurance about my thinking on this. I entirely take on board the point she raises about optionality, and the gravity of a death being registered and the desire for families to be involved in that process. I will continue with my remarks and I hope that they will help to provide some of the reassurance that I know she is seeking.

I have been truly sorry to learn, both in previous exchanges with hon. Members and directly from some of the families, that the requirements for registration in these circumstances have added to the pain and distress felt by some of the victims' families. We have heard this evening about the commitment of the families of Chloe and Liam in fighting for the ability to complete this one final act for their children. I had the privilege of meeting Lisa Rutherford, Chloe's mum, and Caroline Curry, Liam's mum, earlier today, and I would like to put on record my thanks for their time and for setting out so clearly why this issue matters to help them with the grieving process. What they have been through is almost impossible to comprehend. Chloe and Liam were clearly exceptional young people who had great talents, and their lives were taken far too soon. That is a terrible tragedy for their families to have to bear and a huge loss not just to their families, but to their wider community, to which they were clearly contributing, in their different ways. In a moment, I will set out the reasons why that responsibility lies with the coroner, rather than the family, in cases involving an inquest, but first I want to restate the Government's commitment to ensuring that bereaved families remain at the heart of the coroner service. With that in mind, I want to stress that I am committed to learning, both from the specific concerns we are debating tonight and from the families' wider experience of the formal processes following the Manchester Arena attack.

But now let me explain the reasons behind the existing arrangements for registering a death following an inquest and, crucially, why they differ from the registration of deaths where no inquest has taken place. The Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 requires all death registrations to be completed by a registrar. For the majority of deaths, a "qualified informant" provides the information recorded in the register, and this is supported by a cause

[Tom Pursglove]

of death certificate provided by either a medical practitioner or a coroner. The “qualified informant” is usually a family member, and I understand that it is this role that some families, such as those of Liam and Chloe, want to be able to fulfil. But where an inquest takes place, as it has for the Manchester Arena victims, it is, by law, the inquest process itself that must establish the deceased person’s identity and the details of how, when and where they died. To ensure that the inquest and registration details fully align, it is also a legal requirement that, following the inquest, this information is provided to the registrar by the coroner. Because of these requirements, there is no further information that the family can provide for the purposes of registration, over and above what has been established by the inquest and submitted by the coroner. I understand, of course, that the families whom the hon. Members for South Shields and for Garston and Halewood are representing, and others like them, want to have a role in the registration of their loved one’s death. So I also understand why they are pressing for a change in the law to support that. I can assure both hon. Members and the House more widely that I am actively following up on my commitment to consider, as quickly as possible, whether there might be an appropriate solution to this difficult and sensitive issue, with which I have real sympathy.

We must also remember that, as the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood alluded to, many bereaved families, having already experienced the inquest process, might find that the additional responsibility of registering the death adds to their distress rather than eases it. We know that to be the case in some circumstances and for some families, so choice is important. Some families may not want to have to attend the register office to be questioned again about the information they have already provided in the inquest. Some families might not be able to do so, or simply may not understand that they are expected to carry out the responsibility. We have some insight into this from the fact that a number of deaths—around 200 or so each year—remain unregistered because there has not been an inquest and the bereaved family, for whatever reason, do not follow up on the necessary process.

Given the need to balance different experiences and wishes, I have discussed with both hon. Members the possibility of providing families with the choice, rather than an obligation, to be involved in the registration arrangements. We have also discussed options relating

to combining the family’s involvement with the coroner’s existing role. Those are possibilities but, as our discussion this evening has shown, this is a complex issue that involves more than one system. As such, we have to be mindful of a real concern about the potential for unintended consequences. This issue needs to be thought through carefully and sensitively. We must not make any changes that, although well-intentioned, might cause confusion or additional stress for bereaved families because of additional complexity in the system.

I absolutely reiterate my commitment to looking at this issue with the utmost priority and to keeping both hon. Members updated every step of the way. I hope that the families of Chloe and Liam will be able to take comfort from the fact that, by raising this very important issue for the sake of the loved ones they have lost, they have provided a voice not only for others bereaved by the dreadful events of five years ago but for the families who, sadly, will lose loved ones in difficult circumstances in times to come. I hope they will see this debate as part of the legacy they have been working to establish in their loved ones’ names and memories, to which I pay tribute. I also pay tribute to the charitable work that the hon. Member for South Shields set out.

In addition to looking at whether we can introduce choice for families, I will look at how information for the bereaved at inquests can be improved to ensure that the arrangements for the registration of their loved one’s death is clearly explained to them as early as possible in the investigation process—an issue we have touched on in previous conversations on this issue.

It remains for me only to thank hon. Members once again for the opportunity to discuss this issue tonight, and to say to the families of Liam and Chloe, to the constituents of the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood, and to all those affected by the terrible events of five years ago, that my thoughts are with you at this very difficult time, and for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for holding this debate and for the manner in which she presented her argument. All our thoughts are with the families and friends of the victims—those who died and those who live with injuries—of that appalling attack.

Question put and agreed to.

6.38 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 May 2022

[DAME ANGELA EAGLE *in the Chair*]

Foreign Lobbying

9.30 am

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered foreign lobbying in the UK.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela.

I am going to use this debate on foreign lobbying to lobby the Government. They have published their National Security Bill, and the foreign lobbying registration element is still being written and decided upon. It is great that that is there, and it is great that we have the chance—I hope—to influence the Government. I thank the Minister very much for taking the time to be here.

I am going to argue three points. First, we need a substantially improved lobbying law—in fact, lobbying laws. What we have is arguably no longer fit for purpose, if it ever was. Secondly, there is a specific problem with foreign lobbying, which has been getting worse over the past decade. Indeed, the problems that we have had with lobbying arguably go back some 20 years at least. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly for the theorists of war and conflict, in this era there is a blurred line between espionage, agent recruitment and covert, malign, unhealthy, unethical influence, and overt lobbying. One should see those not as being separate, but as being, effectively, on a continuum from dark to light, and perhaps quite an unhealthy continuum with respect to some elements.

To ensure the health of our democracy, we need a stronger and more transparent system, and I want to use my speech to make suggestions for the Government's National Security Bill. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that the Government are still committed to having a substantive—I hope—and broad foreign agent registration process in the Bill. By that, I mean a registration process that involves not only those people who work within a narrow definition of lobbying, but a broader definition, which, in our era, should include the lawyers, the public relations people, the strategists and the enablers not only for foreign states—that is another critical element—but for the formal and informal proxies such as oligarchs, major corporations and broadcasting entities that are obviously linked to those states, especially when they are effectively one-party states with a different and non-democratic tradition.

Primarily, I am talking about Russia—in the past three months, the situation with Russia has changed from light to dark—as well as China, Iran and their proxies. Some in this country argue that such measures should cover countries such as Saudi Arabia, which is an ally—a close ally—but which does a great deal of lobbying in this country, as do other friendly states.

There is also a debate about how we treat people and about whether we should have one set of standards or a sliding scale. Do I think that Oleg Deripaska should be treated in the same way as New Zealand's tourist board? No. It would be welcome to have a light regulatory process for foreign entities such as Sweden's trade authority

or New Zealand's tourist board, but for a Russian oligarch—many of whom have been sanctioned, so this is slightly hypothetical—or a firm such as Huawei, we should insist on much higher standards.

Let me say by way of background that we know that, around the world, Governments and their proxies make extensive use of overt lobbying and influence campaigns. There is nothing inherently illegal about that, although some might consider it unethical. However, a number of hostile states—including, but not limited to, China and Russia—have utilised lobbying as part of their operations against our national interest. Arguably nowadays, covert influence is part and parcel of hybrid forms of conflict. Indeed, in both Russian and Chinese doctrine, hybrid conflict is specifically talked about in terms of military and non-military tools. In Russian doctrine, the first characteristic of modern contemporary conflict is the linkage of military effect with non-military effect, be that information politics, economics or suchlike, of which overt and covert malign lobbying are very much part.

I am glad that the Government have said that this is a problem. In 2019, they declared they would reduce the threat posed by hostile state activity in the UK; that is great.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): May I ask my hon. Friend to explain what he means by covert influence? Does he mean intelligence agents using the cover of being lobbyists, or something else?

Bob Seely: That is a good question; I am not sure I can define it. It is possible to define the outcome, which is trying to influence events in an unethical, potentially illegal way, while not doing so overtly—for instance, by the Russian intelligence service, the GRU. It is apparently not illegal for someone to be a PR person for the GRU. If they were given secret documents, it would be illegal.

Do I think a definition of covert influence should just be somebody working for what they believe to be a foreign state intelligence agency? No, I think it is much broader than that. It would cover people such as Russian oligarchs and Chinese corporations. The issue is that, in a one-party state, it is difficult to make a distinction between state entities, and significant and powerful individuals, who are using covert, non-declared forms of influence to project either their own power, or their own and state power. That is the issue.

I used to hate definitions, and then I did a PhD and found that definitions are rather useful, because one has to decide what one is talking about. One thing I thought was slightly disappointing, though maybe understandable, occurred when the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs looked at the National Security and Investment Bill. We put forward a suggestion for a definition of national security, which the Government did not want to include. A definition of some of these things would be highly valuable. I would certainly welcome attempts by the Government in that regard. In fact, I may do it myself, so I thank my hon. Friend for the question.

The Government said they would adopt a form of foreign agent registration, by looking at

“like-minded international partners’ legislation.”

The two most important, by some distance, are the Foreign Agents Registration Act process in the United States, and the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme

[Bob Seely]

Act in Australia. FARA, in the US, came in in 1938 as a result of covert Nazi lobbying, and was very timely, three years before the US entry into the war. In 2018, the Australians adopted their own foreign influence transparency scheme, largely because of the role of Chinese covert influence in Australia. That has been well documented by the author Clive Hamilton, in his book “Silent Invasion”, which I recommend.

In the US alone, foreign agents spent nearly \$1 billion a year over a three-year period influencing the US Government. In the US, it is big business, and I suggest it is also big business in the UK.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. On the point of how clearly to define lobbying and influence, I can briefly give an example. In 2019, I wrote to the then chair of the Conservative party, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who is now the Northern Ireland Secretary, raising concerns about a gentleman called Ehud Sheleg, who at the time was treasurer of the Conservative party. I raised concerns around national security and permissible donations, because of Mr Sheleg’s very close connections to Russia; his father-in-law was a pro-Kremlin politician in Ukraine at the time. The right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth chose to reply by threatening to sue me for libel. I would welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) regarding that response.

Last week, *The New York Times* revealed that Mr Sheleg had made a large donation to the Conservative party, which was connected to a gift he said he had received from his father-in-law that had bounced around five or six different bank accounts in Europe before landing in Mr Sheleg’s account. Does the hon. Gentleman believe that somebody like Mr Sheleg would meet the threshold for being registered as a foreign agent, even at the time that he was treasurer of the Conservative party?

Bob Seely: The hon. Gentleman raises a valuable point. I am not sure I can argue the details of that because I do not know enough about the individual case. Simply put, if that individual is deemed to be an informal agent of influence, he should be on a registration process. But that is a big if—if he is deemed to be. The question is, who would deem it?

There is a wider question. Would any Government willingly put China as one of those states that are using covert influence? They absolutely should do, but perhaps several years ago they would not have done so, because any Government, including new Labour, would wish to curry favour with China.

On the wider point about questionable behaviour, there are a number of Members of the House of Lords whose behaviour has frankly been questionable, and that is, I am afraid, on both sides of the House. There is a very well known and senior former new Labour Minister who set himself up as a strategist in order to avoid, frankly, giving up almost any information at all on who his clients are. Considering that that person was also a senior EU Commissioner, he was one of the most powerful people in the land, and he was conducting, probably—I do not know, because we know so little

about his business—very powerful, high-level and discreet lobbying, including for Russian clients. There is also a former Labour Attorney General who has taken time out of the House of Lords primarily to give legal advice, seemingly to Russian state or proxy interests.

Is that healthy? Should those people be in Parliament? No. There are, unfortunately, Conservative Ministers who have also behaved, frankly, shamefully, including people who have advised Deripaska. What on earth these individuals are doing and why on earth we allow any of them in Parliament I do not know. I do not say, “Everything we do is fine and everything you do is rubbish,” because that is pitiful and embarrassing. This is a political class problem, not an issue with one particular party. That is the only thing I would say on that. I should probably crack on and make some progress, Dame Angela.

In the UK, no FARA-like legislation exists. The closest thing we have to it is the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014. Which was brought in by the coalition Government. It made some progress, but not enough. It brought in a mandatory register for written and oral questions to Ministers and permanent secretaries by so-called consultant lobbyists. That said, the definition of consultant lobbyists is very narrow. In addition, the Act does not differentiate between clients and those represented, or between foreign and domestic clients.

Thus, a UK entity—be it a peer, a PR company, a finance house or a law firm offering a one-stop shop to oligarchs and other companies—can act on behalf of a foreign entity without that foreign entity being registered. To my mind, that is highly questionable. We know that hostile states are engaged in covert and overt lobbying activities. Most recently, and slightly embarrassingly for the Member concerned, we found out that our secret agencies were discussing one particular case of a Chinese lady working for a Member of Parliament—we all know which one that is.

Cultivating legal and overt, but also questionable and illicit, relationships with serving and retired politicians, civil servants—we often overlook them, but they, not MPs, are the policy experts and policy wonks—academic institutions, think-tanks and regulatory bodies, and using power and influence through an enabling class of finance and legal firms, buys power. Most repugnantly and obviously, this has been practised through the use of lawfare: intimidating legal actions designed to silence those who have attempted to look into, for example, Putin’s oligarchs. There are people here who have spoken out very eloquently on that issue.

The Intelligence and Security Committee’s Russia report highlighted the role of lobbying in the Kremlin’s subversive activities. We know from *The Guardian*’s leak of secret Russian documents that there was an attempt to influence the UK and US. We have had testimony from Bill Browder, talking about Russia indirectly employing public relations firms and helping Russian individuals to avoid EU sanctions. We have had the excellent book and work from Edward Lucas, who has argued much the same. We have also had this from the former Secret Intelligence Service agent Christopher Steele, who said that lobbyists are used to penetrate “British political and business life”.

None of this is ethical. We know about some of it not because we have good laws in this country to protect us, but because of the work of FARA—the Foreign Agents

Registration Act in the United States. The only reason that we found out about the extensive lobbying done by one Member of the House of Lords, Lord Barker, on behalf of Deripaska—

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): Order. I remind everyone who will be contributing to the debate that the rules say that if you are going to identify a Member of the House of Commons or indeed the Lords—not necessarily by name—you have to have informed them in advance. Has the hon. Member done so?

Bob Seely: I have not done so, so I should be much more circumspect.

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): I know this is a very difficult area. May I ask those who are speaking in the debate—not only the hon. Gentleman—to bear those rules in mind when they make their speeches?

Bob Seely: You are right, Dame Angela. Thank you very much for correcting me. I shall be a bit more obtuse about—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Obscure, maybe.

Bob Seely: Obtuse and obscure.

Together with lawyers, accountants, estate agents, public relations professionals and other enablers, lobbyists have formed a buffer around these people. I know that the case with Russia is clearly changing very dramatically—it has been rather forced on us by conflict—but China is another important case that concerns me. I say that as someone who knows that the Government are moving in the right direction, and who is incredibly grateful for the work that the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary have done in this area.

It concerns me greatly that we have not yet made the link between China and Russia. The west has economic dependency on both, be it through trade or energy. Both those countries have dictators for life, and we know that power corrupts and that absolute power corrupts absolutely, so do we really think that President Xi will turn out to be better than President Putin? I would be sceptical. Both covet territory outside their control, both have aggressively rearmed and, perhaps most importantly, both propagandise their people against us and are shaping their people for war in the information and narrative space. China is more sophisticated and richer, and it arguably treats some of its people, especially its Muslim people, worse. It is a rising power, whereas Russia is a declining power, but there are too many similarities between them to claim that China is not Russia. It is a more sophisticated version and, as people such as Clive Hamilton argue, many of its covert activities are just more sophisticated versions of the same thing.

Like the Kremlin, the Chinese Communist party uses state, non-state and quasi-state actors through the United Front Work Department and “cultural and ‘friendship’ associations”. It is alleged to spend some \$10 billion a year on external propaganda efforts. The Chinese state also makes use—perhaps more than Russia does—of quasi-state entities, and Huawei is a case in point. It has provided trips, sports tickets and donations to all-party parliamentary groups, and has employed a former head of GCHQ and a former UK chief information officer.

It has also used several lobbying firms, and has employed a former head of Ofcom and even a former head of the Foreign Office.

In September 2019, Huawei gave £150,000 to Jesus College, Cambridge, which later produced a White Paper that was favourable to Huawei’s inclusion in the UK’s 5G network. It has done many other things; what I have mentioned is just the tip of the iceberg. What concerns me is that, while this was happening, Ministers whom I respect very much were arguing that Huawei was a private entity—a private firm. I do not expect Ministers to be geniuses, but that situation was uncomfortable.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On the point about higher education selling its soul to the Chinese Communist party, surely it is not just the Government’s role to regulate their engagement with foreign actors. It is also for other entities in the country, such as higher education.

Bob Seely: The hon. Member makes a very important and valuable point. Cambridge University’s relationship with China is very unhealthy, and Professor Stephen Toope’s leadership of Cambridge has been pretty depressing and questionable. He is not here to defend himself, so I will be careful what I say, but I note that the more woke Cambridge has become, the more it seems to have sold itself to the Chinese state, which I do not think is necessarily a defence of the values that it should be standing up for.

I think that higher education would say it needs clear guidance from the Government. On the foreign agent registration process, it would be excellent if the Government had something to say on the need for universities to register and to explain why they are taking on some students, because we have had Chinese military students coming to study PhDs in sensitive dual-use areas. We need to question that to ensure that we are doing the right thing and that we are not aiding countries to develop technologies that will be used against us.

I will wrap up in the next five minutes, because I am aware that I have taken a long time—my apologies.

We need to improve lobbying laws. I suggest to the Government—I will write separately, but the Minister has the study I produced for them two years ago—five major reforms to tackle the issue of foreign lobbying in the UK, which I hope would create better law and a better National Security Bill when it comes up.

First, we must create laws to compel individuals and entities that lobby in the UK on behalf of hostile states and their proxies to record their activities on a national register. I hope the Minister will take this on board in the constructive way that it is intended. Consultant lobbyists are important, but they are only one part of the problem, as many of us know. Hostile or potentially adversarial states make use of non-lobbyist individuals and entities—cultural entities, educational entities, public relations consultants, research firms, reputation managers, law firms and banks. If someone does work that impacts on policymaking or the political world, they need to be registered. In this day and age we need a broad, not narrow, understanding of what that means for the public good, and for the honesty, integrity and transparency of the political system, which we all want to see improved and strengthened. Nobody wants to sleazify our political, economic or legal system, so we need a belt-and-braces approach, while understanding that the demands we

[Bob Seely]

put on the New Zealand tourism board would probably be very different from those we place on a foreign entity, such as Huawei or the Confucius institutes. I note that the normally rather left-wing country, Sweden, has banned Confucius institutes. Should we?

Secondly, we should create laws to force foreign Governments and their proxies to disclose when they spend money on political activities in the UK. Thirdly, we should create laws to bar foreign Governments and their proxies from providing political, financial and other support during election periods. As at least two hon. Members have said, there is a question mark about donations, and I know from previous debates that people with dual nationality are an issue. That debate is obviously not going to go away.

Fourthly, we should create laws to compel foreign Governments and their proxies to label and disclose materials and campaigns undertaken in the UK, including online, not only during election periods but more generally outside election periods, so that we know where advertising is coming from. People should be able to see those messages, which are perfectly legal, but they should understand their provenance. Fifthly, I would make those laws enforceable by significant criminal penalty, so that people who break the law and do not uphold high standards have an expectation that the punishment will be a bit more than a slap on the wrist.

There is a further series of options; they include the following. Should we have a one-tier or one-size-fits-all regime? Should we have a weak, moderate or strong regime? Should we have a two-tier system that either requires nothing of some foreign entities or has a low bar for the sort of information that is required? We have a laissez-faire approach, which is not entirely unhealthy; it is good for our economy. I recognise that we want people to be free to set up in business, and set up what they are doing in this country. My suggestions are not about creating layers of bureaucracy for the Swedish food producers association or the New Zealand tourism board, but every time Huawei hires a lobbyist, we should know. Every time Huawei approaches a Member of the House of Lords or the House of Commons, we should know. If people want to do work for these people, we should know.

People complain about MPs, but I do not think MPs are necessarily the biggest problem—I am not trying to do a mea culpa for us all. The biggest problem is the law firms and people with significant legal and financial power, who do not exist in as transparent a world as we do. Although clearly some of the most outrageous and obvious—how should one say it?—lapses of judgment are often seen in the political world, real power is also influenced by civil servants and Spads. It used to be influenced by the European Commission, though clearly no more in this country, and it is also influenced by significant legal and finance firms. If they are impacting, via lobbying, the business of politics and policy in this country, they should be covered.

I will give one example: Huawei. There is a case to argue that Huawei did not do that much direct lobbying for much of its existence in this country, but that it worked through BT, which effectively became the Huawei spokesman in this country and Huawei's chief defender. BT may say, "It is rather more complicated than that,"

but Huawei was, arguably, effectively influencing UK policy through UK firms that were in business with and economically aligned to Huawei. I think that became a significant problem in the last few years. I am delighted to have played a modest role in the campaign to ensure that Huawei was not part of the 5G network, which was absolutely the right decision. I thank the Government for listening to me and other Members on that issue, and indeed the US Administration as well.

To sum up—I thank hon. Members for giving me a little more time than I said I would take; my apologies—we need to substantially improve lobbying laws, because the laws we have are genuinely not fit for purpose. Do we really want to have these endless lobbying scandals in our legal and political culture, which come around like a carousel every few months, every couple of years? We have the chance to do something better; I very much hope that the National Security Bill will tighten that up. The Minister has been generous enough to say that she is sympathetic towards these arguments, and I thank her.

Within the domestic lobbying framework, there is a specific issue with foreign lobbying. As I said at the beginning, it is important to understand that, whether we think it and see it or not, other states see this action as part of a hybrid conflict model. It is almost the first line of attack—to try to shape our opinions, to try to separate us from the US and to try to get a narrative and message into our economic, legal, political and informational debates in this country. We want a free society, but we need to understand that we have to protect that free society. At the very least, people need to know where some of the messages and campaigns come from.

In this era, there is a battle between open and closed societies. We have seen that most recently from the Ukraine war, but we might see it in the future from China in a Taiwan war, or a confrontation with the wider world. We need to do what we can to defend the open society. The way we best do that is by ensuring transparency, honesty and integrity in our political system. Ensuring that we have strong and fair laws over lobbying and foreign lobbying is one of the critical ways we can do that.

9.57 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) can speak as long as he likes on this subject as far as I am concerned. I have had quite a lot of conversations with him in private. He is the House's expert on this issue and he does us all an enormous favour in raising these issues.

I agree with him; I think we have been too naive for too long—ineptly naive, in some cases. The most striking statistic in this field that I have come across recently is that of the people sanctioned this year by the British Government in relation to the activity in Ukraine, at least 10—10 that we know of—were people who were given tier 1 visas by the British Government in the last few years. In other words, we were inviting people in, letting them sit down and purvey their view of the world in the UK, largely because we were just interested in their money. In the end, Putin has seen us be so craven about Russian bling and he has felt that we are weak and corrupted, and that has emboldened him. It is one of the things that has assisted in what has eventually happened in Ukraine.

Stephen Kinnock: I absolutely welcome, as my hon. Friend does, the Government's decision to stop the golden visas scheme. Does he not think it would be incredibly helpful for the Government to publish their review into the scheme, which Parliament has been waiting for for more than a year?

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, I am absolutely confident that the Minister will tell us later when it is going to be published, because the Home Secretary has repeatedly said, in answer to questions from me in the Chamber, that it will be published soon. "Soon" in ministerial language means pretty much anything the Minister feels like it means, but we are beginning to lose patience with the soon-ness, or the lack of soon-ness. The Minister is looking wry and quizzical, but I am sure she will help us out later.

I want to refer to one specific issue. On 8 March I wrote a letter to the Foreign Secretary following her appearance the previous day before the Foreign Affairs Committee. I published the letter on my Twitter feed. I wrote to her to address her allegation that I had obstructed the progress of sanctions legislation through Parliament. In the letter I quoted from various speeches made in Parliament, one of which included allegations made in 2018 against Mr Christopher Chandler. It was not my intention to repeat those allegations, which I accept have subsequently been disproved. I am happy to set the record straight today in Parliament and regret any distress caused to Mr Chandler.

Mr Steve Baker: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for recognising that the allegations have been disproved. Will he join me in imploring all Members who engaged in making those allegations to accept that they have now been disproved?

Chris Bryant: I think it is a matter for individuals to make their decisions on that. I have said what I said and the hon. Gentleman knows why I said it. There is not a formal process for a Back-Bench Member to correct the record. That exists only for Ministers, although they have been notoriously poor at doing it. As the Speaker said at the beginning of this debate: if Members are able to correct the record, it is important that they do so.

I used to be a lobbyist for the BBC and I was always trying to persuade Governments to do things. In and of itself, lobbying is not a bad thing. Indeed, the word "lobby" comes from Parliament because it was the entrance to St Stephen's Chapel, which was the lobby where people could grab hold of a Member before they went into the House.

I remember sitting on the Public Bill Committee for the Mental Health Act 2007. I was not an expert on the treatment of mental health patients, and my participation in that Bill Committee relied on lobbyists, some of them from mental health charities, some from patients groups, and some from the pharmaceutical industry. In the end I had to make astute judgments when people were trying to influence me, but of itself lobbying is not wrong, although it needs to operate under strict standards. Even foreign lobbying is okay, or we would not have a Foreign Office. Of course, it was Sir Henry Wotton, a Member of Parliament from 1614 to 1625, who, when he was a British diplomat in Augsburg, said:

"An ambassador is an honest"

gentleman

"sent to lie abroad for the good of his country."

The Minister is nodding. I am not sure whether she is in favour of an honest gentleman or lying.

In this country, in the modern era, we have to be very careful about covert operations in the UK. I think that particularly because we are a free society, believe in the rule of law and have a democratic process that is very open, sometimes we are more vulnerable than others might be, and we have to be cautious and alert to pernicious lobbying from state actors and their proxies who do not wish this country well. That applies to not just a few countries, but quite a significant number.

I am aware, not just because of what I get myself but other Members as well, of attacks that are co-ordinated directly out of St Petersburg on individual Members of this House and the House of Lords, particularly those who have been critical of the Putin regime. The attacks are co-ordinated and are deliberately inciting. They hide behind anonymity and often they are fake accounts. It looks as though 100 people have attacked the individual Member, but that is because there are 100 fake accounts all created by the one person. We do far too little in this House to make sure that that is exposed and made clear.

I have often worried that the Government have repeatedly refused to investigate the Russian activity and determination to try to undermine the political process in this country. I note that this Prime Minister and the previous Prime Minister both said that they had not seen successful attempts to undermine British democracy. I do not know what success means in their minds when they say that. It seems preposterous that they will not investigate.

As the hon. Member for Isle of Wight says, the law courts are a very useful tool for proxies of state actors overseas who want to ensure that any criticism of them is closed down. We have seen several journalists and authors dragged through the courts, at extreme expense, by people with very deep pockets. I am hopeful that the Government will address that in legislation later this year. I also point to some broadcasters, such as Russia Today. I do not think any British politician from any political party should have taken money from Russia Today. It is a scandal that many took many thousands of pounds from Russia Today. All those who did should be completely open about it, because they have effectively and knowingly been not just useful idiots but deliberate agents of a foreign state. The same would apply to other broadcasters from other states, including Iran.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight rightly mentioned advertising on Facebook. One of the ways in which Russia has sown discord and misinformation around the world is illustrated by the situation in Catalunya, which I am particularly aware of. There they put across all sorts of imagery that was later proven to be completely false. None the less, it got lots of clicks and got everyone very excited and condemning the Spanish Government, even though it was all proven to be untrue. We must take that deliberate attempt to sow discord in western societies very seriously. I have always wanted, and I still want—notwithstanding the objections—to end anonymity on social media. For some reason, people feel able to write things on social media under the cloak of anonymity that they would never think of saying to another person or writing in a letter that they had to put their name to. I think that is cowardice, but it is also disrupting the British democratic system.

[Chris Bryant]

I am not sure whether you, Dame Angela, are among the Members of Parliament on the Russian sanctions list. It is quite interesting that none of the Members of the Foreign Affairs Committee who wrote the “Moscow’s Gold” report a few years ago, which is deeply critical of the Russian Government, is on the sanctions list. I can only presume that we are on the hit list instead.

I wrote to the Russian ambassador to make the point that although they are alleging that all these British MPs are Russophobic, we are not Russophobic. We love Russia; we have loved the Russian people, though sometimes the television presenters do make one doubt their sincerity when saying that they love people regardless of their nationality. We are not Russophobic; it is just that we have a beef with the actions of the Russian state under President Putin. The ambassador wrote back to say that the list provided was just one of several sanctions lists that already existed, and that was one that they were now revealing. I can only presume that other people are sanctioned but we do not know about it.

Parliament is particularly vulnerable. I hope the Minister will take that away from this debate. We have hundreds of all-party parliamentary groups. The Committee on Standards, which I chair, has produced a report on this. The head of security here is very concerned, as are the two Speakers, about the vulnerability of the Parliamentary system because of the way that APPGs are funded, sometimes directly by foreign Governments and sometimes indirectly, and sometimes probably not as accountably as we would like. Some countries forbid members of their legislative body from taking any form of hospitality of any kind, let alone several thousand pounds-worth of trips abroad, from a foreign state. We should consider that.

I believe that it is important that British Members of Parliament have strong working relationships with Members of Parliaments in other countries, but we should fund that, not let it be funded on an ad hoc basis by other countries who may want to do us harm. I am one of the Members who went to Qatar. I went as a guest of the Qatari Government because I wanted to argue with them, really, about the way they intend to hold the World cup. I note that a large number of Members have been taken to Qatar at great expense by the Qatari Government over the past year. Is that appropriate? In the end, I wish I had not gone on that trip. I suspect we need to address that issue. Incidentally, the director of security in Parliament told us that the biggest anxiety was that these groups are not necessarily funded directly by the Governments, but by their proxies, through third, fourth or fifth parties. We need to tackle that.

In the US, Congress has to produce an annual report on the lobbying of Congress by foreign actors. Why do we not do that here? One of the House’s Committees should produce an annual report to Government, perhaps with the assistance of Government, on foreign states’ actions in lobbying Parliament.

I also think we ought to have a new offence of aiding and abetting a foreign state as a Member of Parliament or as a peer. I am not quite sure how I am going to word this—I hope somebody is going to help me with it; the Clerks are normally very good—but I think that there should be an amendment to clause 3 of the National Security Bill to address that.

My argument is that lobbying must always be in the open. Transparency is how we ensure that there is nothing pernicious, vicious or inappropriate going on. Ministers should reveal all significant attempts to lobby them in a timely fashion. The Standards Committee has produced a report today stating that we must end the current exemption whereby, if two Members of Parliament go to the same event that is paid for by a foreign Government or by anyone else, a Minister does not have to declare it for months and months and does not have to say how much it cost, but a Back-Bench or Opposition Front-Bench Member has to declare it within 28 days. Surely all Members should be treated equally.

That is why it is important that Ministers should reveal all significant attempts to lobby them, including via hospitality, tickets, dinners, accommodation, holidays, travel and individual meetings. For instance, it is an absolute mystery to me why the UK took so long to sanction Deripaska. Greg Barker—who is, I think, no longer a Member of the House of Lords—was effectively acting as an agent of Deripaska, who is now sanctioned because of his corrupt involvement in the Russian state. However, we did nothing about it. Why was that? I want to know.

What about Abramovich? Why did that take so long? There was even a moment when the Prime Minister thought that Abramovich had been sanctioned, but it turned out he had not. I suspect that that was because the Home Office was saying, way back in 2018 and 2019, that Abramovich was a person of interest; in other words, he was dodgy and it did not want him coming to the UK, and therefore it was not going to allow his tier 1 visa to be renewed. However, the Foreign Office refused to sanction him. Was that because of the direct engagement of Abramovich with individual Ministers? I ask the question because we need to know the answer.

Finally, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight is absolutely right about the need for a proper register of lobbyists working on behalf of foreign agents. I do not think someone should be able to simply say that they have lots of clients in this House; they should have to list all clients in both Houses. For my money, I would also say that Arron Banks should have been on that list. Of course, when anybody is on that registered list, there should be a ban on Members of either House engaging with them financially or in any other manner.

We have been naive for far too long. We need to tackle all these issues, especially as they apply to state actors from Russia and China. Otherwise, we will lose the precious democracy that we believe in.

10.14 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Dame Angela. It is a special privilege to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for bringing this important issue to our attention and for his knowledge. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has a deep interest in this matter. Both he and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight bring real knowledge to the debate.

I am someone who sees the benefits of lobbying, as referred to by the hon. Member for Rhondda, in certain circumstances in this place. Lobbying for the right reasons has changed my opinion and opened my eyes to many issues. It has helped to increase my knowledge and better understand subjects, and has provided me with information as a Member of this House.

Seeking to unduly influence a Member changes that. While we must all hold ourselves accountable for decisions, there is a role for restrictions or protections—a term that I would rather see used—to be put in place in this House, which should not point the finger.

On several occasions over the past few years, we have seen the impact that foreign lobbying can have on a democracy and the undue influence of some lobbying, which many Members have highlighted, that probably has its roots in Chinese or Russian politics. While the impact of some of that lobbying may inevitably have been over-emphasised, there is a root of truth that this House has not been untouched by Chinese and Russian influence.

It is a crucial that the UK has a platform to introduce safe lobbying, as there is nothing wrong with lobbying as long as it is done correctly and does not put our democratic process at risk. Democracy is the heart of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, so it is great to be here and to discuss how we can strengthen that in a positive fashion.

I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight for putting together his briefing on foreign interference. It had much detail and was powerfully put. It provides a real insight into the steps we can take to regulate our lobbying. Lobbying is a key characteristic of politics, domestically and internationally, for foreign agents. The issue lies in lobbying being part of the operation of foreign agents to undermine political institutions. That has been seen many times, not only in relation to China and Russia, but to other countries as well.

Countries such as Australia and the United States of America want to adopt legislation, such as FARA and the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act, that aims to regulate foreign lobbying. It will mean that foreign agents and their proxies will be legally obliged to register themselves and make their activities public knowledge. I look to the Minister for her response about our future plans. Do the Government intend to do something similar to what Australia and the USA have done?

The UK and its respective devolved Administrations are also at risk of foreign interference. We are a leading democracy and, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight stated in his report,

“a centre for the international finance, legal and media worlds”.

We are very much a kernel—a core—for that. The briefing notes accompanying the 2019 Queen’s Speech stated that the UK would work to

“reduce the threat posed by Hostile State Activity”.

We have seen attempts to manipulate devolution, which the Government confirmed in its own information relating to the Scottish referendum. It is my responsibility to ensure that Northern Ireland is protected against any foreign threat through illegitimate lobbying. Attention must be given to the four Governments within the UK, not just our Westminster Government. I return to my original question to the Minister and ask what action will be taken to ensure that the devolved Administrations—the Northern Ireland Assembly in my case—can have direct contact with the Minister in order to ensure that we can protect and rebuff the groups that are unduly lobbying?

Alongside the debate about lobbying is the issue around social media, which has never been more prominent in political life. Covert digital influence campaigns increase

the scope for misleading information when it comes to election time, when foreign influences may pay an instrumental amount of money to portray false information. There are lots of false stories, and the media must address that as well.

Oligarchs, in particular those from Russia and other authoritarian regimes, act in the shadows with no regulation. As the UK is an open society with no legislation to check such things, that leaves us vulnerable to outside interference and cyber-attacks. Russia has used both state and non-state entities to partake in unauthorised activity in the UK. These have been described by the Chief of Defence Staff as the “grey area” between peace and war—how true that is.

Many tools involve military influence, but we must not forget political, economic and social influences as well. Owing to the UK’s lack of legislation, there is little transparency about what is actually illegal and worthy of punishment. The 2014 lobbying Act is narrow and out of date. Does the Minister intend to address that? If so, perhaps a timescale for consultation and ultimate legislative change would be helpful. That should allow for fuller discussion of the steps we can take to protect and preserve the political institutions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

In conclusion, I welcome ideas for the reform of foreign lobbying in the UK—particularly a law that compels individuals and entities lobbying in the UK on behalf of hostile and authoritarian states to record their activities on a national register so that we know who they are and so the protections that we need and desire can be delivered. The British public have a right to feel protected and deserve to know the full extent of foreign influence in the UK and the devolved institutions of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

This debate has been helpful, Dame Angela. I thank the hon. Member for Isle of Wight for bringing it forward, and thank others for their contributions. I very much look forward to what the Minister has to say and, indeed, to the shadow Minister’s contribution too.

10.21 am

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Dame Angela. As I sum up on behalf of my party, I cannot help but feel that this is a very British debate. I am unsure whether anyone here is particularly opposed to better rules for those lobbying on behalf of foreign Governments. The evidence—which the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has alluded to on many occasions, not only in Westminster Hall but in the main Chamber—that it has damaged the fabric of our society, and of the national security risk, has been clear.

I fully expect the Minister to rise to their feet, acknowledge the issue and the pertinence of the rhetoric deployed by all of us here today, declare that something must be done, and, if they will forgive me, then do absolutely nothing about it. I would be delighted to be proven wrong, but this type of action has been trailed for quite some time without any evidence that we are any closer to either the stricter regulation of lobbying or any sort of foreign agent registration.

Now, that is not to denigrate the quality of any of the contributions made here today—from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Rhondda and, indeed, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely). We did at least agree, I think, on the issues of higher education across these islands. I would say to the higher education sector that it must not only look in the mirror and reflect on what it sees in its relationship with the Communist party of China, but change what it sees.

On my party's position, our ask is simple: the UK Government must follow the example set by our colleagues in the Scottish Government and create a fit-for-purpose lobbying register to improve transparency and accountability. The Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016 came into full operation in 2018 and was designed to improve transparency of face-to-face lobbying contact between organisations and Members of the Scottish Parliament, members of the Scottish Government—including Scottish Law Officers and junior Scottish Ministers—special advisers, and the permanent secretary of the Scottish Government. Transparency International has called on the UK Government to replicate that and set up a comprehensive lobbying register for the United Kingdom Parliament that includes relevant information, and for the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments be replaced by a statutory body with sufficient authority and resources to regulate all that goes on here.

Members who pay attention to such things will know that my parliamentary group wrote to the Government's anti-corruption tsar, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), asking him to rapidly reform lobbying rules following the second invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation. When that secondary invasion began in February, as some Members have already intimated, we had a dismal roll-call—I will not mention any by name, Dame Angela—of the assorted MPs, Lords, former MPs, former civil servants, and the like, who had sold their expertise to firms linked to the Russian state. While it was certainly the most dismal example, anyone who had been paying attention—quite a few of them are in this room right now—had been warning about the dangers of allowing that sort of activity to go on unchecked.

I think the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) mentioned the Russia report, but it is vital that we do not get somehow embarrassed about bringing it up. The findings of this report, from a cross-party Committee with a Conservative majority, were clear: the arrival of Russian money resulted in a growth industry of enablers—individuals and organisations who manage and lobby for the Russian elite in the United Kingdom. Yet nothing—absolutely hee-haw, as I say in my part of the world—was done to implement it.

The biggest fear, especially when we are about to listen to a Minister smother—forgive me—an attempt at a proper legal framework for lobbyists with kindness, is that if we are unable to take full responsibility for those who lobby on behalf of a hostile regime such as the Russian Federation, then I wonder, really, who is going to take responsibility when this sort of thing happens again and again. Because we not just talking about Russia, as many here have alluded to today; plenty of people in debate have mentioned “communist” China. The resources and the global reach of Chinese Communist party-linked companies simply dwarf that of those from the Russian Federation. It might not be

the most agreeable thing to say, but I think that one of them happens to be the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which the UK led in setting up. While China is not necessarily a hostile state—I agree with my friend the hon. Member for Strangford—we certainly know that it is a hostile, anti-democratic economic and political competitor.

My biggest worry about those who work on behalf of states that are also nominally neutral, which I think the hon. Member for Isle of Wight alluded to—

Bob Seely: Briefly, the hon. Member is right to point to a better definition. When I was talking about “hostile” states, probably I should have changed that to “hostile, adversarial and potentially highly competitive”, which I think is probably a better definition.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I will not disagree with the hon. Member on that, but I go back to the point I was about to make about states that are nominally neutral or even allied to the UK and how we hold them to account. I am thinking particularly about the Gulf states—nominally allies, yet ones whose Governments have shown themselves capable and willing to act in the most heinous ways on the territory of ostensible allies.

The jamboree for the real estate, legal and general enablers of Russian money might have ended, but let us be in no doubt: it is going to keep rolling on for all the rest of them, allies or not. The increasing gentrification and sterility of much of central London will become emblematic of the hollowing out of UK institutions on behalf of this global capital.

If that sounds bleak, that is because it is. But let me end with one final appeal to the Minister. It would give even this inveterate Scottish nationalist great joy to see our devolved Administrations lead the UK in implementing a proper system of lobbying regulation, which I alluded to earlier in my speech; but I am afraid, Dame Angela, that I will not be holding my breath.

10.27 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on securing this timely debate, ahead of future debates on the National Security Bill. There is much in his remarks that I and my colleagues would agree with. I absolutely share his concern at the insidious and growing influence of hostile state actors on these shores and in these very corridors, here in Westminster.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who pointed out that we must be alert to pernicious lobbying from countries, but that not all lobbying is suspect, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also said. Much lobbying is necessary. Experts really do help us to understand the issues that we are making decisions on and can bring together constituents from across the country to tell us their views. I used to work for Christian Aid and WaterAid and was involved in coming to talk to Members of Parliament. What we need is an open and transparent system that we can trust and that does not give hostile actors undue influence or allow them to undermine that system. As my hon. Friend said, this debate should be enlarged to include not just Parliament but law courts, broadcasters, social media and all-party parliamentary groups.

We have heard myriad examples today from colleagues of how deeply foreign states have penetrated British political life and our economy. I am sure there are far more that we do not know about, which is really what much of this debate is about. From public relations firms employed by Russia to help individuals to avoid EU sanctions, to lobbyists who advocate for Kremlin-connected Russian clients and a whole host of pinstripe-clad enablers of states with interests and values counter to our own, foreign interference is a multibillion-dollar industry.

A particularly disturbing sector of this industry is lawfare, as Members have pointed out. Our courtrooms are not battlefields to be used to silence and destroy activists, journalists and politicians who are brave enough to shine a light on the places that foreign actors do not want anyone to see—or they should not be. The UK is becoming the global capital of the lawfare industry. According to a survey of 63 journalists in 41 countries, more cases were brought against journalists in the UK than in America and Europe combined. I hope that the Minister will address that later.

We also need to have a conversation about all-party parliamentary groups. Questions must be asked about their regulation and reform, and whether they are acting as conduits for improper access by lobbyists and hostile foreign states. Again, APPGs are useful; indeed, they are a really valuable part of our parliamentary system. However, we need to make sure that they are open, transparent and not being used by malign actors, in order for the system to be maintained and not brought into disrepute; otherwise, down the line, we may face having to stop this way of parliamentarians meeting to discuss important issues.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight has put forward a number of practical proposals, some of which Labour has already supported or proposed. For instance, Labour would expand the scope of the statutory register of lobbyists to cover those who commercially lobby Government as well as consultant lobbyists, who are also known as in-house lobbyists. I agree that more definition is needed, because of the continuum that the hon. Gentleman talked about. We should not just give up on having a register because we cannot define things; we need definition, a register, and then for that register to be used.

In the hon. Gentleman's report on foreign interference, which I have read, he rightly called for new legislation to curtail the influence of lobbyists during election times. That is quite right, which is why the Opposition have called for it too. I was on the Elections Bill Committee last year, and the shadow Front Benchers tabled a new clause that would have required the Government to consider measures to address foreign interference in elections, including the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism taking the policy lead for protecting democracy and the operational role being given to MI5. Labour also proposed measures to stop overseas electors from being able to donate to political parties here in the UK, noting the concerns of the Russia report about the influence of foreign money in our politics.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that it seems that there is a loophole, because the National Crime Agency and the Electoral Commission both say that they will not look

into the real source of financial donations to political parties? They say that it is permissible if a donation has come from a British citizen or somebody who is on the electoral roll, and then they do not look into where the money may actually have come from. If a British citizen has received a large sum of money from someone who is not on the British electoral roll, the agencies do not look into the source of that money. What would my hon. Friend say needs to happen to close that loophole, which seems to be a massive gaping hole in our defences?

Fleur Anderson: I agree with my hon. Friend that more needs to be done about that clear loophole. The register that we are talking about needs to apply not only to Members once they are elected but to the time before elections, or that issue needs to be addressed with a separate register. It must be very clear where the money comes from. Too often, in the whole of this system, UK entities can be used as a cover for foreign entities. That is the problem we have now and it is not being addressed. I hope that the National Security Bill will address it; if it does not, it will not be addressing our national security issues.

For two years now, Labour has been calling consistently for the Government to implement in full the recommendations of the Russia report of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which was published in July 2020. However, those recommendations remain unimplemented.

Malign Russian money cannot continue to pollute our economy, our politics and our democratic institutions. However, I say to the hon. Member for Isle of Wight that I am afraid that his own Government's record in this area suggests that they do not share our concerns. His party has accepted millions of pounds in donations from Russian-linked money in recent years.

Take Ehud Sheleg, for example, who has been mentioned already. He is a wealthy London art dealer whose most recent position was as the Conservative party's treasurer. In February 2018, Mr Sheleg donated \$630,000 to the Conservative party. The money was part of a fundraising blitz that helped to propel the Prime Minister to victory in 2019. However, Barclays bank has established that the money originated in a Russian account of Mr Sheleg's father-in-law, Sergei Kopytov, who was once a senior politician in a previous pro-Kremlin Government in Ukraine. Again, it is a question of where the money comes from, which involves looking behind the initial donors.

There is the case of financier Lubov Chernukhin. Ms Chernukhin has donated £700,000 to the Conservative party, and in March, the Electoral Commission confirmed that the party had accepted another £80,000 from her. Chernukhin is the wife of a former Russian deputy Finance Minister under Vladimir Putin. She has now donated almost £2 million to the Conservatives, almost £800,000 of that during the Prime Minister's leadership. The Prime Minister himself—I notified him that he would be mentioned—once played a game of tennis with the wife of a Russian former Minister in exchange for a \$270,000 donation.

Successive Conservative Governments have promised for years to clamp down on foreign lobbying and dirty money. We have to ask why it has taken so long to do that. Is it connected to those donations? The Conservatives' own politics has kept tripping them up.

[Fleur Anderson]

The Conservative party does not have a monopoly of such connections, but Labour does share the concern so excellently articulated by the hon. Member for Isle of Wight, who introduced the debate, and does take foreign lobbying seriously, as shown by the amendments we tabled to the Elections Bill, which were voted down.

Labour would expand the scope of a statutory register of lobbyists. We would also establish an integrity and ethics commission. That would replace the current failing system and have power to influence the content of the ministerial code, initiate investigations of possible breaches of the code, and impose a range of binding sanctions. We would also ban people from lobbying for five years after leaving public office, and give the commission power to issue penalties for breaking the business appointment rules.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight is right that foreign lobbying is a problem that must be addressed. The gap in legislation regulating foreign lobbying is threatening the UK's national interest and its national security. The Conservative Government have paused, delayed and dithered, but now they must take action. I hope to hear from the Minister what that action will be.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Angela, I think for the first time, and I thank you for the timely opportunity to debate this important topic. I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who introduced the debate, and express my gratitude to the good number of Members who are present today for their active participation in the debate.

As several Members have noted, the UK is a vibrant, international, open and welcoming country with which to do business. The Conservative Government will continue to welcome foreign investment and business to this country. However, in order to protect that openness and vibrancy, it is critical that we have robust measures to provide transparency on legitimate lobbying and have powerful tools to hand to deter illicit or harmful activity when that arises. To ensure transparency of legitimate lobbying activity, the Government regularly publish details of ministerial meetings with third parties, so everyone can see who Ministers meet with, and about what.

On illicit activity, let me first be clear that we have robust structures in place to identify foreign interference and, where necessary, take proportionate action to mitigate the threat. The recent Christine Lee case is an example of that.

We are going further. The Government have announced their plans to strengthen powers to tackle illicit finance, reduce economic crime and help businesses to grow. As noted in the Queen's Speech, the Government will bring forward the economic crime and corporate transparency Bill, which will include measures to reform the role of Companies House and improve transparency over UK companies.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Will the Minister confirm whether there will be an additional commitment from the Government to reform Scottish limited partnerships, which are a valuable conduit for dark money coming into the UK to undermine our democratic process?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his pertinent question, and we will write to him with an answer to it.

The legislation will include measures to reform the role of Companies House and improve transparency with respect to all UK companies, and it will build on measures in the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022, which was passed in March, to establish a new register of overseas entities, requiring those behind foreign companies who own UK property to reveal their identity.

Furthermore, as has been stated several times today, the National Security Bill, which was introduced to the House on 11 May, will provide our law enforcement and intelligence agencies with new offences, tools and powers to detect, deter and disrupt threats from those acting on behalf of foreign states with a harmful purpose in the UK, such as seeking by illegitimate means to influence public figures or target our democratic way of life. As my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight helpfully mentioned, the Government have made it clear that there is a threat and they are seeking to address it.

Mr Steve Baker: During the course of the debate, I have checked the website of the Security Service, MI5. It defines espionage and concludes the definition as follows:

"It may also involve seeking to influence decision-makers and opinion-formers to benefit the interests of a foreign power."

That firmly fits within this debate.

The Minister mentioned using illicit means, but could she please be clear? The Security Service does not refer to illicit means, but just "seeking to influence". The crucial point is this: could MI5 be doing more to help Members of Parliament? The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to people being "ineptly naive". Is there more that the Security Service could do to brief Members of Parliament about what to look out for if we are to play our part in counter-espionage?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. One or two nights ago, a meeting about security was held for Members, which led to a very wide-ranging conversation. People have taken his point, and I am sure there will be another meeting. I am grateful for his suggestion.

As part of the National Security Bill, the Government will bring forward a foreign influence registration scheme, which will require individuals to register certain arrangements with foreign Governments to deter and disrupt state threats activity in the UK, bringing the UK into line with our allies, such as the USA and Australia, with their FARA and FITSA, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight.

Bob Seely: It is completely true that, hastened by war, we are now moving in the right direction; two economic crime Bills and the National Security Bill are going to be very positive. However, can the Minister give an indication of whether the Government will have a broad understanding of what constitutes lobbying, or whether they will have a narrow definition that lobbying is done only by "lobbyists"? It is the former, broader understanding of lobbying that would be the biggest help in framing the lobbying elements of the National Security Bill.

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. Friend has come to the kernel. He has put his point on the record, and I am sure the people in the Home Office will have heard his plea.

It is welcome that Parliament is paying close attention to this topic. I congratulate the Committee on Standards on its recent report on APPGs, mentioned today, which notes that improper influence and lobbying by hostile states is a key threat facing APPGs today. I welcome that report but, of course, it is a matter for the House to decide on the rules governing APPGs. The Government welcome any approaches that mitigate the risks.

I also want to confirm, with regard to foreign lobbying, that a business or organisation undertaking consultant lobbying on behalf of a Government outside the UK or an international organisation would be required to register and declare that Government or organisation as a client. To answer the right hon. Member for Rhondda—

Chris Bryant: No, honourable.

Mrs Wheeler: Well, it is only a matter of time, I am sure. Regarding the Home Office report, I can confirm that the Home Secretary will provide an update imminently, in due course.

Chris Bryant: Which is it?

Mrs Wheeler: It is both.

Members have taken so much interest in the debate, and I appreciate the level and depth of information that they have brought to it.

Jim Shannon: I asked a question about contact with the regional devolved Administrations, in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, regarding those in privileged positions, to ensure that the protocol and protections that will happen here can filter out to the regional devolved Administrations.

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. We must work in close conjunction with the devolved Assemblies on anything that happens in the UK Parliament.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I hope that is reciprocated, and that things come from the devolved Administrations to this place. The Scottish Government already have the Lobbying (Scotland) Act 2016, which was implemented in 2018. I hope the Minister will listen to them on how that has impacted lobbying north of the border.

Mrs Wheeler: Indeed. That is a very fair point, and I am sure the Home Office will have heard it. To conclude—

Chris Bryant: Before the Minister concludes, will she give way?

Mrs Wheeler: Of course.

Chris Bryant: We have a few minutes, so we might as well take them up. I will intervene twice, if the Minister lets me. The Committee on Standards has said that at the moment some Members chair an awful lot of APPGs for foreign territories. We have wondered whether we should not have a limit so that a Member is allowed to chair, say, only six or 10—certainly not 28. Perhaps it would be a good idea if Members were not able to receive any financial support from foreign Governments. Would the Government support those two measures?

Mrs Wheeler: I am afraid I will take that under advisement.

Chris Bryant: I shall try another one. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) made a really important point, which is that most hon. Members have no understanding of whether somebody who comes through the door is operating on behalf of a foreign state. Of course it is up to us to make our own judgment calls, but there probably ought to be a means for a Member to ascertain confidentially whether the person they are dealing with is a person of concern to the Government. The Minister will not be able to answer that today, but will she take away the serious point that the hon. Gentleman makes?

Mrs Wheeler: I will take that away and reflect on it. That is a perfectly reasonable question.

Mr Steve Baker: Just as a point of information, there is a leaflet available to Members of Parliament—I think it is A5, folded over; a very short booklet—from the Security Service, which tells them what to look out for when they are targeted by foreign intelligence services. I hope all Members will take the opportunity to get one from the Vote Office.

Mrs Wheeler: This debate is giving us all more information than we had an hour and a half ago. That is very good news.

Thank you very much for chairing this debate so well, Dame Angela. I thank all Members for their contributions, and I wish everybody a good day.

10.47 am

Bob Seely: I thank all Members for taking part and you, Dame Angela, for chairing the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered foreign lobbying in the UK.

10.48 am

Sitting suspended.

Stoke-on-Trent: Video Games Enterprise Zone

11 am

Dame Angela Eagle (in the Chair): I will call Jonathan Gullis to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a video games enterprise zone in Stoke-on-Trent.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I am delighted to be joined by my fellow Stoke-on-Trent Members of Parliament for the debate, as well as by the Minister—although she may feel that she has drawn the short straw in dealing with the combined might of the Stoke mafia.

In 2019, during the historic general election campaign, I first raised the idea of Silicon Stoke—a bright new future for our great city, which was once the heart of this country's industrial revolution. I believe we have a huge opportunity in Stoke-on-Trent to be at the forefront of the new revolution, which will be digital. Having set out a vision for what Silicon Stoke could mean for the Potteries, I am incredibly grateful to Councillor Abi Brown and her city director, John Rouse, for buying into the idea. Since then, we have been united in promoting our vision for a Silicon Stoke, and we have taken it forward by setting up the Silicon Stoke board to create and drive progress. We have published our Silicon Stoke prospectus, setting out how Silicon Stoke could transform our city and local economy. Our prospectus sets out a vision in which Stoke-on-Trent can stand alongside the most hi-tech smart cities of the world.

In the same vein as Leamington Spa, which has its Silicon Spa down the road, we believe that Stoke-on-Trent has a massive opportunity to become a hub for the UK video games industry, as well as for digital and creative jobs more broadly. There is a huge prize waiting for us if we can make this a reality.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this excellent debate. We in Stoke-on-Trent know that we are the best connected for gigabit fibre broadband in the whole UK. We now have absolutely fantastic connectivity—better than any city in the country—and are putting massive investment into skills, including gaming skills. We also have much cheaper office space than almost any other city in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that our city is the perfect location for these industries to move to and create the jobs we need to level up places such as Stoke-on-Trent?

Jonathan Gullis: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who is Stoke-on-Trent-born and bred. He is doing his city proud in representing it. There are so many fantastic reasons why Stoke-on-Trent is the right location for these industries, and I will discuss the gigabit installation that was provided by VX Fiber and Stoke-on-Trent City Council, with funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport that

came under budget. We sent £600,000 back to DCMS because we are that efficient in Stoke-on-Trent—I look forward to boasting about that later.

The gaming industry is one of the most exciting sectors of the worldwide economy and it is growing year on year. It is far from the niche hobby that it used to be, and it now dwarfs the value of other entertainment media. The global market for video games is huge: approximately 3 billion people play games, and the market is worth around \$180 billion. In the UK alone, there are more than 32 million players, and the domestic market for video games reached a record £7 billion in 2020.

Unlike other sectors, video games have been pandemic-proof. Last year, UK games revenue was up by 32% compared with 2019. Research by the international game developers' association, TIGA, shows that between April 2020 and December 2021, the game development sector's annual contribution to UK gross domestic product increased from £2.2 billion to £2.9 billion.

We should be proud that the UK is already a world leader in this area, with well-known developers such as Rockstar North in Scotland and Codemasters in Leamington Spa putting out some of the best known games, such as the Grand Theft Auto series. The industry is immensely valuable, and offers fantastic opportunities that are well paid, satisfying and future-proofed. About 80% of the games development workforce is qualified to degree level or above, and Rockstar alone has more than 650 staff in its headquarters in Barclay House in Edinburgh. TIGA has revealed that between April 2020 and December 2021, the number of creative staff in studios surged by almost 25%, and by an annualised rate of 14.7%, from 16,836 to 20,975 full-time and full-time equivalent staff. Additionally, the number of jobs indirectly supported by studios rose from 30,781 to 38,348.

The video games industry is also very much in line with the levelling-up agenda. The industry supports economic growth in clusters throughout the UK, with approximately 80% of the workforce based outside London. The UK has the largest games development workforce in Europe. In the era of global Britain, games development also offers us a fantastic chance to showcase the UK to the world. Games development is hugely export focused, with around 95% of games studios exporting at least some of their content.

Not only is the market for video games huge and ever growing, but there is a raft of media produced using the same techniques and technology. For example, Disney's recent smash hit series, "The Mandalorian", was produced using Epic's Unreal Engine, which is one of the platforms that developers use to make games. Silicon Stoke is not just about games development; we very much hope it will propel Stoke-on-Trent to the forefront of other digital and creative sectors as well.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a strong case for the video games enterprise zone. Our city is looking to attract the best creative businesses as part of Silicon Stoke. Already the pathways for future employment have been created through the work of the university, and the new digital and creative hub at Stoke-on-Trent College, with courses in virtual reality, 3D printing and drone technology. Creative company Carse & Waterman, which specialises in animated

content using green screen and computer-generated imagery, reaches out to schools in our city to enthuse the next generation. Does my hon. Friend agree that we now need to incentivise more employers to develop our Silicon Stoke ambitions?

Jonathan Gullis: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for the people and businesses of Stoke-on-Trent Central. I have had the pleasure of meeting the award-winning animators of Carse & Waterman, who have even worked on “Ant and Dec’s Saturday Night Takeaway.”

I know that my hon. Friend took the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to see the new technological hub at the Cauldon campus of Stoke-on-Trent College in her constituency. She is absolutely right that it is about incentivisation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) said, we have the office space, the digital fibre connectivity, and the college and university-level education. All the infrastructure is there. What we need is for the Government to send a big message to the sector that Stoke-on-Trent should be its home, because there is no reason why it should not. With the exciting e-sports potential of the indoor arena—the only one that would be in existence outside London—I cannot think of a more exciting place than Stoke for the games industry to thrive.

The plan is for Stoke-on-Trent, which fired the flames of the industrial revolution and is famed for its coalmining and ceramics heritage, to be at the heart of the new digital revolution. What does Silicon Stoke mean in reality? As we set out in our Silicon Stoke prospectus, it means making Stoke-on-Trent the most digitally advanced city in the UK, achieving once again the renown it already enjoys for ceramics—a small but mighty city, punching way above its weight in the national economy. That will be achieved through a mixture of digital infrastructure, skills and securing opportunities for our home-grown talent to stay in Stoke-on-Trent and establish the Potteries as the best place in the UK to work in video games.

Harnessing the power of our city-wide full-fibre network and 5G data, we will: expand the provision of digital skills with the establishment of a full-fibre academy and by ensuring that every school is connected to the full-fibre network; grow the small and medium-sized enterprises digital sector, with support from Stoke-on-Trent City Council and the UK’s leading video games university, Staffordshire University; maximise the opportunity to deploy internet of things technology in our existing manufacturing sector; transform health and social care through improved digital connectivity; integrate smart technology into our city’s energy and transport infrastructure; and expand our reach as a leading hub of video games development and digital production, cementing our status as a leader in the sector with the construction of a specialist e-sports arena in our city centre.

Let me set out just one example of how we are going to realise this ambition and make Stoke-on-Trent the main character in the UK’s digital story. Since December 2021, the Potteries Educational Trust has been running a digital schoolhouse across the city. UK Interactive Entertainment’s digital schoolhouse is a national not-for-profit programme that provides primary schools with an opportunity to experience free creative computing workshops. The programme is supported by large gaming companies such as Nintendo, PlayStation and Sega.

The trust has been offering primary schools across the city a free day of programming workshops: 17 primary schools have taken up the offer, with 1,694 pupils benefitting from 16,311 hours of digital enrichment. Staff are also benefitting, with 93 hours of staff continuing professional development delivered.

To further our ambition to establish a new digital cluster, Stoke-on-Trent City Council has commissioned a gaming report from TIGA—the network for games developers and digital publishers, and the trade association representing the video games industry—with Staffordshire University. Overseen by Dr Richard Wilson, who was kind enough to share his thoughts on Silicon Stoke in advance of today’s debate, the report will set out how we can grow the video games industry in Stoke-on-Trent. I look forward to presenting the report, with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, to the Minister in the near future.

Having spoken to Dr Wilson, I suggest that we can grow a video games cluster in Stoke-in-Trent in the following ways. The Minister might want to take notes, because this is where our asks come in. First, building on the success of the video games tax relief, which was first introduced in 2014 and has led to average growth in industry headcount of almost 10% a year, the Government should raise the rate of that relief to match Ireland’s planned 32% rate. TIGA research shows that increasing the rate of video games tax relief from 25% to 32% would yield nearly 1,500 additional skilled development jobs, more than 2,700 indirect jobs and almost £200 million in additional GDP contribution per annum by 2025. Increasing the rate of video games tax relief would enhance the environment for making games in the UK and therefore indirectly support a games cluster in Stoke-on-Trent.

Secondly, the Government should introduce a video games investment fund. Difficulty accessing capital has consistently been one of the top factors holding back many games developers in the UK. The UK Government should introduce a video games investment fund to provide pound-for-pound match funding, up to a maximum of £500,000, for original intellectual property game projects. A video games investment fund would be able to support start-up studios and small studios, including in Stoke-on-Trent. Currently, no dedicated seed funding schemes are available to support start-ups in the games industry in the area, although the UK games fund, based in Dundee, does provide prototype funding of £25,000 for small studios. Research from TIGA and Games Investor Consulting has estimated that introducing a video games investment fund would, between 2021 and 2025, add £72 million in additional tax receipts for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, while costing £26.5 million. In terms of yield, that is a 170% return on investment.

Lastly, we must enable Staffordshire University to support start-up studios. Other successful games clusters have that link already. For example, Abertay University in Dundee has a strong connection with local industry and operates the InGAME programme, which provides research and development funding to games businesses. In a similar manner, we must enhance the links between industry, higher education and local government locally in the Potteries. One way to do that would be through a new video games enterprise zone for Stoke-on-Trent. Since their introduction in 2012, enterprise zones have

[Jonathan Gullis]

been a major success across the country, and there are now 48 nationwide. In 2015 the Government reported that the enterprise zones had created 19,000 new jobs and attracted £2.2 billion of private investment and more than 500 new businesses.

Locally, we have our own hugely successful enterprise zone: the Ceramic Valley enterprise zone. Located along the strategic A500 corridor and launched in 2016, Ceramic Valley has attracted thousands of new jobs, from JCB, Jaguar Land Rover and Amazon, all creating jobs locally. Backed by £3.4 million of investment by Stoke-on-Trent City Council and the benefits that come with enterprise zone status—including a business rates discount worth up to £275,000 over five years for businesses that move to one—Ceramic Valley has been a huge success for our city.

By setting up a new enterprise zone focused on games and interactive content, we could create a unique opportunity to put Silicon Stoke at the heart of the UK's digital economy. The success of that kind of policy at national level is clear in the massive boom in the UK video games industry since 2014, when the video games tax relief was brought in. Having a similar tax break for local companies via a new enterprise zone would have a similar effect, turbocharging our local games industry. That enterprise zone could take the form of a more formal partnership with Staffordshire University. For example, there are already a number of university enterprise zones across the country.

Originally, four pilots were backed by £15 million of funding from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, with the universities required to match-raise £2 of match funding for every £1 of Government investment. The pilot schemes will be fully evaluated at the end of the scheme in 2023, but an interim report from 2018 found that the university enterprise zones had been successful in attracting new businesses on to sites at the universities, with tenants confirming that the university enterprise zone had led to a positive impact on their business activities. The four pilot university enterprise zones were set up specifically to attract high-tech firms to locate near universities.

We should adopt a similar model, but instead of focusing on high-tech firms it should focus on complementing what is already going on in Silicon Stoke. Potentially linked in with the existing centre of excellence that is Staffordshire University, which has a strong relationship with Epic Games, the creator of Fortnite, that initiative could rocket-jump Stoke-on-Trent's ever growing digital offer. Staffordshire University has been exploring how to support video games businesses to set up locally, and a new video games enterprise zone could be the final piece in that jigsaw.

To some, Stoke-on-Trent may not seem like the natural choice for a burgeoning video games and digital cluster. However, as was written in *The Guardian* only recently, "something is stirring" in the shadows of our industrial heritage, and the scene is already set for us to become the heart of the UK's video games sector.

Stoke-on-Trent is one of the new Zoom towns or cities where remote and flexible working is king. According to the recruit company Indeed, we are the third biggest growth area of that kind of work. We have an incredibly strong base to build on. We were one of the first cities in the UK to benefit from VX Fiber's fibre-to-the-premises

open access model, which brought gigabit-capable internet to the doorstep of homes across our great city. VX Fiber has hooked up just over 50% of homes across the city, and aims to have 150,000 serviced by the end of 2023. That £50 million network, in which the Government invested £9.2 million, will unleash a staggering £625 million into our local economy and form the bedrock of our digital -revolution.

Thanks to our successful levelling-up funding bid—again, done with my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) and for Stoke-on-Trent South—Stoke will become the first city in the UK to have a stadium that specialises in e-sports. We will be able to make the most of the ever-growing e-sports market, which has a global audience of 500 million people.

Based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, the City of Stoke-on-Trent Sixth Form College was one of the first 44 trailblazer colleges that started teaching the new digital production, design and development T-level. It is one of the Government's computing hubs, driving forward the teaching of computing in schools and colleges across the country.

Stoke-on-Trent College has formed a partnership with VX Fiber to open a full-fibre academy, which will offer courses on a huge range of digital skills, from motion capture, software engineering and drone mapping to underground radar surveying and electrical equipment maintenance and testing. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central pointed out, the college has also recently opened its new digital and creative hub at its Caudon campus, part-funded by the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire LEP with £250,000 to create sector-leading digital and creative learning facilities.

Staffordshire University, on our doorstep, is the leading university for video games in the country. The university set up its first video games course in 2004, with 55 students enrolled; it now offers roughly 20 different courses in this sector, with more than 2,000 students enrolled. The university is internationally recognised and ranks as the 13th best institution in the world for games design and development. Talent trained in Stoke-on-Trent has gone on to play a big role in the UK's leading games studios. Some 31% of Codemasters's staff come from Staffordshire University, while 20% of Rare's staff are Staffordshire alumni and 13% of the staff at powerhouse studio Rockstar Games were trained in Staffordshire.

We now need to keep that talent in Stoke-on-Trent and avoid the brain drain. It is great that the games industry in the west Midlands has already seen the biggest growth in the UK of 132% between 2017 and 2019, much of which is based in Birmingham and Leamington Spa. The next step is to get the games industry to take off in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. With our almost unrivalled digital infrastructure and local skills base, we make the perfect location for the UK's next video games cluster.

I am pleased to say that, on the back of this strong foundation, businesses are taking note. With the size of our local talent pool and the shortage of talent elsewhere in the country, we are already starting to see companies set up in Stoke-on-Trent. Last year, the leading advertising agency VCCP opened a new office, in partnership with one of our leading digital businesses, Carse & Waterman, and staff from VCCP London have been working locally to raise awareness and provide training, work experience, mentoring and paid internships.

In conclusion, we have the perfect building blocks to make Silicon Stoke a reality. We have the top-notch infrastructure needed to capitalise on the innumerable opportunities the new digital revolution will bring. We have a long conveyor belt of locally trained talent, which starts in our primary schools—thanks to the Digital Schoolhouse—and continues all the way to Staffordshire University. We have a clear vision of how to seize this opportunity and the backing of the fantastic leadership team on Stoke-on-Trent City Council for our vision of Silicon Stoke. Levelling up is key to most video games, and with the extra boost a video games enterprise zone can provide, video games will be key to levelling up Stoke-on-Trent.

11.19 am

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): Thank you for your chairing this debate, Dame Angela. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) for highlighting the important role that the video games industry plays in supporting very high-skilled jobs and levelling up across the UK. I appreciate the characteristic forcefulness with which he makes the case for his exciting vision of Silicon Stoke.

As my hon. Friend says, something is stirring in Stoke. It is a fantastic city with a very bright future and, through our investments in gigabit broadband—another area that I lead on—it is one of the best connected places in the UK. It is represented by three MPs who have great belief in and passion for the place they represent, and it has great local leadership from Councillor Abi Brown and one of our nation's youngest Lord Mayors, Councillor Hussain.

I am glad to see Stoke's three MPs in the Chamber—they are giving Teesside a run for its money as a powerful parliamentary lobby. They are united in their efforts to keep building on the city's success story and proud history in the creative industries. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) for her close working with Stoke-on-Trent College, Staffordshire University and creative businesses such as Carse & Waterman. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who was banging and clattering his pottery drum for the city in the dark days of the previous Parliament, long before these two 2019 upstarts came along.

I want to set out how we are supporting the video games sector to build on very strong growth, and how we think video games can contribute to our mission of levelling up the country. I will also talk about the importance of skills in achieving those goals. It is great to hear about the really strong partnership working between local MPs, councillors and educators in Stoke.

Jack Brereton: Can my hon. Friend the Minister think of a possible reason why the video games industry would not locate to Stoke-on-Trent? I cannot think of a single one.

Julia Lopez: I agree. With great digital connectivity and the partnership working between central and local government, there is a great story to tell about Stoke. It is certainly something that I will take back to my Department after the debate, as we look at the initiatives we are focusing on in the creative industries.

The video games sector, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North rightly pointed out, is flourishing. It contributed about £2.8 billion to the UK economy in 2019, and that is reflected in the number of people employed in the sector, which has grown from 13,000 in 2011 to 27,000 in 2019.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is incredibly proud to support the growth of our creative businesses, and we are doing a lot of work to ensure that the games sector, in particular, can thrive. We are putting together a £50 million creative industries programme—a sector vision—as part of our spending review settlement, and I will take away some of the really exciting ideas that have been put forward. That includes up to £18 million invested in the Create Growth programme, which will help high-growth, creative businesses access finance across six regions in England outside London so that they can reach their growth potential. We will be announcing the regions for the Create Growth programme this summer. That builds on the success of our £400 million Creative Scale Up pilot programme, which to date has supported more than 200 businesses across three regions, increasing a total aggregate turnover of £13.5 million.

We have also announced specific support for the video games sector through a £800 million expansion of the UK Games Fund, which will accelerate the growth of the UK games industry. Since 2015, the fund has supported more than 190 early-stage video game development projects, and supported businesses that have the potential to grow and flourish. That builds a strong vibrant SME developer community. I am interested to hear some of the ideas that have been put forward, and I very much encourage small businesses in Stoke to apply for that programme.

My hon. Friend asked what more we can do to support local businesses through tax incentives. Obviously, a lot of this is outside my remit, but we recognise that the future growth of the games sector requires us to maintain our competitive edge in tax reliefs. We must ensure we that continue to be an attractive place to do business, given the global competition. Our games tax relief has strengthened the UK's reputation as one of the leading destinations across the world to make video games, and it has really worked. Since it was introduced in 2014, it has supported 1,640 games, with UK expenditure of £4.4 billion. In 2020-21, the relief supported the development of 640 games. We have to ensure that we continue to be internationally competitive. We keep all these tax incentives under close review, and I will continue those discussions with the Treasury in advance of any economic statement.

In the 1970s, "Dungeons & Dragons" coined the term "levelling up" for when the player reached certain milestones. Since then, the notion has become a central feature of many popular video games. We take that forward as a mission in our levelling-up agenda. We think the creative industries play a critical role in supporting regions across the UK, and game development has been key, from Sheffield to Leamington Spa, from Newcastle to Bristol, and from Knutsford to Dundee. Some 55% of game development roles are outside London and the south-east, so it truly is a UK-wide industry. Video game clusters are engines for local economic growth and jobs throughout the country. The £39 million Creative Industries Clusters programme, run by the Arts and

[*Julia Lopez*]

Humanities Research Council, has supported Dundee's video games cluster through InGAME. I am keen to look at the lessons we can learn from that to see whether any of them can be applied to Stoke. The funding has created 337 new companies since 2020, and created or safeguarded 477 jobs.

We are committed to continuing that kind of cluster work and I want to see that success replicated in Stoke. It is great to see the investment in the Ceramic Valley enterprise zone and the announcement last week about the £56 million levelling-up funding that will be going to development opportunities in Etruscan Square and the transformation of Stoke's Spode site.

We are also working extremely hard on digital connectivity. We invested more than £8.5 million through the local full-fibre network project, which has helped to incentivise commercial investment in the region, including the VX Fiber plan, which will be targeting more than 30,000 properties for a gigabit-capable connection. For those not in line for the commercially or publicly funded roll-out, we will be investing more in Project Gigabit. The procurement for Staffordshire, which includes Stoke, is anticipated to cover another 70,800 premises and will be taking place later this year.

Alongside robust growth and relentless innovation, we need to make sure that the skills are in place to help the video games industry reach its full potential. That is why we are working very closely with some of the bodies that my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North mentioned. Our creative careers programme has given 27,000 young people hands-on experience with industry, through immersive events and work experience opportunities. The next phase of that programme, with a three-year grant competition launched this month, will launch fully later this year and do even more to support people, particularly those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Specialist skills are needed to support video games, from development and production to art and sound design. In Stoke, there are a range of further and higher education study opportunities in place for routes into the video games industry, from diplomas in games design and programming at Stoke-on-Trent College, to games courses at Staffordshire University and Keele University. I know that Staffordshire University, in particular, provides an excellent pathway to a career in gaming. The university won the 2021 excellence in university and industry collaboration award from the UK video games industry trade association, TIGA—you say tiger, I say tiger; I am not entirely sure which one is

correct, but we should probably call the whole thing off. The award is supported by a partnership with UK Games Fund's Tranzfuser programme, which supports graduates to take an idea for a game to a playable reality.

Staffordshire University was the first university in the UK to offer a degree in e-sports in 2018, and now offers postgraduate courses too. That shows that Stoke-on-Trent remains committed to becoming a hub for gaming. I am really interested to hear more about the e-gaming stadium and hope to learn more as the proposal is developed.

I am pleased to see that funding from the Build Back Better scheme has been secured to create a virtual reality hub for Stoke-on-Trent College. We continue to invest in important opportunities for young people across the United Kingdom to get the resources and knowledge they need to progress exciting careers in the creative industries. I look forward to working with my hon. Friends to support regional hubs, not only to keep local talent, but to attract new talent from across the country.

As we have already said this morning, Stoke is a great place to do business, with low office rents, great digital connectivity and inspired leadership. With a vision like Silicon Stoke, there is a really exciting future that we can build here. I will take away some of the comments on tax reliefs. We will continue to work in partnership with local colleges and I want to look at the potential for a creative cluster. With the levelling-up funding in place as well, all kinds of things are going on here. I say to businesses across the UK, "Go to Stoke; it has got inspired parliamentarians who are working very closely with us in Government and with a diligent and energetic local leadership."

Jonathan Gullis: We would love to welcome the Minister to meet the Silicon Stoke board members, and to have a joint MPs' roundtable with leading actors in the sector—some are in Stoke and some are not—so we can help get the message out about why Stoke is a great place to be.

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his generous invitation, which I am sure I will be able to take up shortly. I commend him and my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent South and for Stoke-on-Trent Central for their passionate vision for the great city that they represent. I thank them for the debate today.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Cost of Living: Fiscal Approach

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the fiscal approach to tackling rises in the cost of living.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to see so many Members present, although they appear—almost without exception—to be on the Opposition Benches. It is good to see the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places. I want to put on the record my thanks to Unison, which is working tirelessly to help its members through these toughest of times, and to Anna Birley, for her efforts with the research I will be quoting shortly.

It is not my intention to speak at great length. I am aware that colleagues wish to contribute and I want to ensure they get the opportunity to speak up for their constituents. However, before I begin, I would like to say a few words about the tone of the Government's response to this crisis—not just for the next 90 minutes, but beyond. This is the most serious issue facing our country. Some of my constituents in Barnsley Central are facing an emergency, and the Government are providing nowhere near enough relief.

I want to share the words of a working single mum who contacted my office as an example of the indignity, pain and sacrifice happening up and down the country right now:

"I have not eaten for 2 days due to saving as much as possible for my son to get by until payday. I honestly can understand why so many people feel there is no other way than to end their life. It is humiliating to beg for food."

She does not want Ministers telling her to work more hours when British workers already put in the longest shifts in Europe. She does not want Ministers telling her to buy non-branded food on the weekly shop when people are so desperate that baby milk is now being security-tagged in supermarkets. Most of all, she does not want Ministers telling her that the Government cannot ease her pain when that is simply not the case.

We are all aware that the effects of this crisis are almost boundless, but I will focus my remarks on the impact on public sector workers. Barnsley was left devastated by the pandemic. The suffering endured will live long in our memory, but so too should the resolve of those who pulled us through—not least our NHS staff, our carers and our educators. They are too often taken for granted, but their true value was there for all to see during our darkest hour. How quick we are to forget.

Unison research found that two in five health workers have had to ask family or friends for financial support in the past year. Roughly the same number are taking on extra work just to make ends meet. Nearly every member of school support staff that Unison surveyed—96%—was worried that they did not have enough cash to cope with the rising cost of living, meaning that a quarter have had to take on a second or, in some cases, third job.

The treatment of those on whom we relied so heavily and so recently is unacceptable and untenable. It is unacceptable because they deserve better. They paid their dues 100 times over, and the Government need to

do right by them. It is untenable because it is exacerbating a staffing crisis. Public sector pay is lagging behind the private sector, and the long-term effect could be severely detrimental to services.

Take our NHS as an example. Already, 500 nurses and midwives quit every single week. We are at risk of losing thousands of low-paid staff because of that gulf in pay with the private sector. While Morrisons guarantees workers £10 an hour, there is an ad for a porter on the NHS website for £9.65 an hour. While UPS pays drivers more than £16 an hour, the NHS pays just £10 an hour. Public service workers have already endured more than a decade of pay restraint, and it cannot continue. Public sector workers need a pay rise that reflects not only the cost of living crisis, but their true value to wider society.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. The public sector workers in my vast, remote constituency underpin life—I am thinking of health workers, people who keep the roads clear and everyone else. Given the sheer distance involved, however, everything we buy up in my part of the world, from a bar of soap to a washing machine, is that much more expensive due to the cost of getting the stuff there. However, these people are on similar rates of pay to those mentioned by the hon. Gentleman. Does he agree that, in addressing this hugely important issue, the remote location of parts of the UK, such as the west country or Wales, should be taken into account?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman is fortunate to represent a beautiful part of our country. There are some particular pressures on the rural economy, and he is absolutely right to highlight them.

An NHS worker in Barnsley with two decades of service recently contacted me to say that 63% of the meagre pay rise she received went back into the Treasury coffers because she was on universal credit. She said:

"Having worked throughout the pandemic, pushing my children from pillar to post as after school clubs and usual childcare arrangements were cancelled, so that I could work on the front line—often with COVID positive patients—please can you tell me how the government can morally justify this?"

Perhaps the Minister can try to justify it. If not, will she outline what progress the Treasury has made in making the funds available for a long overdue and much deserved pay rise for those who quite literally risked their lives for us?

Soundings from No. 10 suggest that several Ministers, including the Prime Minister, are pushing for further public service pay restraint, but wage inequality is going through the roof. Research by the High Pay Centre reveals that the ratio of chief executive officer pay to that of medium earners is 63:1—almost doubling in a year—so it is telling whose pay Ministers are willing to restrain. By giving porters in our NHS enough money to put enough food on the table, the Government would protect public finances by avoiding a staffing crisis. Awarding a fair pay rise is morally and, critically, economically the right thing to do. Problems are being caused not just by what our key workers are seeing in their payslips each month, but by what is being taken out by stealth—the cost of working.

I have two suggestions for the Minister, both of which would lessen the burden on key workers and have an immediate impact. The first is about mileage rates.

[*Dan Jarvis*]

According to a survey by Unison, three out of four health workers who use their cars for work say that the current mileage rates do not cover prices at the pump. Care workers, environmental health inspectors, social workers and community healthcare staff are all out of pocket for doing vital work. Some 9% report that high petrol prices and out-of-date mileage payments mean that they have had to cut down on patient visits. More than half the workers at one South Yorkshire hospital say that mileage payments not covering costs is having a severe financial impact on them.

Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is responsible for setting approved mileage rates, but they have not been updated since the 2011-12 tax year. National Joint Council rates for local government workers have not changed since 2010, and NHS rates have not been updated since 2014. Ending the mileage rates freeze would put an average of £150 back in the pockets of workers over the course of a year.

The Minister will no doubt point to the Chancellor's 5p fuel duty cut, which—let's be honest—is modest, but some retailers stand accused of failing to pass on half that amount. Petrol and diesel prices are at record highs, so more needs to be done. Will the Minister provide an assurance today that the Treasury will conduct an immediate review of mileage rates—a review that would encourage and include provisions for the NJC and the NHS to do the same?

My second suggestion is on car parking fees. Not everyone can use public transport to get to work. Between a quarter and a third of the healthcare workers Unison spoke to in South Yorkshire use a car because of the lack of public transport. That is what makes reintroducing hospital car parking charges so wrong. Three out of five staff at one South Yorkshire hospital said that the reintroduction of car parking charges will have a high or extremely high impact on them financially.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be wise for the Government to look to the Welsh Labour Government, who have scrapped all car parking charges at NHS hospitals in Wales? It is a small measure, taken with a number of others, but supports the hard-working staff he is talking about.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Yes, I would point to the story that is being told in Wales, and to the benefit and value of Labour in power, leading by example.

I am aware that night shift workers remain exempt from car parking charges. However, it will still cost NHS staff £90 million a year to park. The Government cannot allow the price of parking their car to become the straw that broke the camel's back for our health workers. Will the Minister provide an assurance that she will meet with ministerial colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care as soon as possible to find a way to scrap all car parking charges for NHS staff? It is plain for everyone to see that the Government's plan is not working. When plan A fails, the Government's reaction should not be to keep repeating the plan, it should be to formulate plan B. Let us see what tomorrow brings.

Finally, the incredible Barnsley Foodbank Partnership supplied 8,000 food parcels in the 12 months to March—that is up 60% on pre-covid levels. Now demand is up and donations are down, as more people struggle with the cost of living crisis. I honestly do not know how some people have got through the last few months, and I dread to think about the sacrifices they will have to make to get through the next few. It does not have to be this way. If the Government grasp the seriousness of what people are facing, and act now, we can avoid a social catastrophe. I hope the Minister will consider the suggestions that I have made, and that others will no doubt make today, in the spirit that they are offered. Our public sector workers—indeed, our entire country—deserve better than this.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I am not going to impose a hard and fast rule, but I hope that Members will be considerate and keep their speeches to no more than five minutes. That will ensure that all colleagues get in on the debate. I am going to implement a hard and fast rule on the start time for the wind-up speeches. The SNP spokesperson will start no later than half past three.

2.43 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. As I am sure other Members will do, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this debate and setting the scene so eloquently. I also pay tribute to Unison for its work on the issue. Most of us will have seen the briefing note that came out; I commend everything in it. As the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) made reference to hospital car parking charges, he will be aware that it was the SNP Government in Scotland who lead the way on that—not helped by private finance initiative contracts organised by the previous Scottish Labour Executive. I will not seek to be party political any further in the course of this debate.

Something that I have found difficult over the last few months, particularly since the beginning of the Ukraine crisis, has been people talking about the cost of living crisis as if somehow it is a new thing; it is not a new thing. It has been exacerbated by 12 years of Conservative austerity. In many respects, we are right to call it a crisis, but it is something we have been dealing with for quite some time. I would argue that it is not just a cost of living crisis. Ultimately, at its most fundamental level, it is a low pay crisis.

The UK Government like to talk about the living wage, and I am sure we will hear the Minister do so, but we know that to refer to it as a living wage is to inadvertently mislead the House. It is not a real living wage. It does not reflect the true cost of living for many of our constituents, and it is nowhere near the benchmark set by the Living Wage Foundation.

The UK Government must look at whether that real living wage is fit for purpose. As most of us know from our constituency postbags and surgeries, it is definitely not. The Government should also look at the pay discrimination baked into wage rates in the UK. The reality is that 16-year-old apprentices are still being paid roughly only £4 an hour. A young person on £4 an

hour certainly does not get cheaper products at the supermarket as a result of their age. They should not be getting a lower rate of pay.

There are other things we can do. We should absolutely look at a windfall tax. That has become incredibly topical in this place, with people talking about putting a windfall tax on the likes of Shell and BP. I would like them to pay a windfall tax. There is no doubt that they are doing immensely well out of the current crisis. Why not also consider an additional windfall tax on supermarkets and Amazon? We know that the future of work is changing and that our high streets are struggling very much. That is a natural consequence of consumers using big, out-of-town supermarkets and getting goods delivered from Amazon. Given that they are doing very well out of this, perhaps we should consider putting a windfall tax on them as well.

The UK Government should also increase benefits in line with inflation. I was really disappointed when they legislated for a real-terms cut to benefits earlier this year. The people whose benefits are being cut are among the poorest and most vulnerable in society. This is no time to leave them behind. They do not have the disposable income to make a slightly more difficult choice at the supermarket. Let us increase benefits in line with inflation.

If the Scottish Government, who have a fixed budget, can uprate benefits by 6%—I accept that that is still below inflation—the UK Government, with all of their borrowing powers, should be able to do so, too. In reality, the biggest difference between the UK and the Scottish Government is that the UK just puts it on borrowing.

We should also reinstate the pensions triple lock. Pensioner poverty is on the rise and we do not talk anywhere near enough about it in this House. The fact that we have one of the lowest state pensions in western Europe should be a stain of embarrassment for this Government. They like to go around talking about being a global Britain, while pensioners are literally having to choose between eating and heating. I ask the Minister to reflect on that.

We should also reinstate the £20-a-week uplift to universal credit in the social security system. The Government were right to concede at the beginning of the pandemic that social security was inadequate in its current form. It was inadequate in March 2020, and, by the way, it is still inadequate now. Taking that £20 a week away from families means that they are losing £1,000 a year when they can least afford it.

Jamie Stone: Carers for the elderly, the infirm and the sick are crucial in remote parts of Scotland such as my constituency. I have carers pulling out, giving up and calling it a day right now. I am sure the hon. Gentleman agrees with the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) that we must look again, as a matter of extreme urgency, at—how shall we put it?—payments for carers and the regime for taxation on mileage for them and other health workers who have to travel. It is a crisis right now.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members who take interventions to bear in mind that I am trying to keep speeches to around five minutes.

David Linden: Thank you, Mr Twigg. I am coming to the end of my remarks. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), who is himself a carer. More can be done on mileage, and I certainly echo the calls for HMRC to reform it. The Government need to look again at the carer's allowance, because it is inadequate, particularly south of the border.

There is one last thing that I would like the Government to reflect on. I appreciate that there are massive ideological differences between me, as someone who believes that the state has a big role to play in people's lives, and the Government, who undoubtedly do not believe that. However, given that Select Committees are receiving evidence from senior figures that the economy is in an apocalyptic situation, the Government should be considering placing price controls on food. I appreciate that they would not be naturally comfortable doing that, but we cannot end up in a situation where our constituents are not even able to choose between heating and eating and are instead left with nothing at all. I know that that view will be borne out.

In closing, many of my constituents have less than £10 in their bank account. They cannot afford to nip down to the local shop for the most basic provisions. Yet we have a Chancellor, who is responsible for the fiscal approach, who managed to spend £10,000 to nip down to Wales for a Tory gala dinner. That strikes me as the action of someone who is quite out of touch, which might be why we are having this debate today.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I remind Members that you can see on the clock what time it is.

2.50 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

On Sunday, Michael Lewis, the chief executive of E.ON, announced that 1 million of its customers were already in arrears with their fuel bills. He expects that to rise to half of all its customers—4 million people—by October. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research predicts that more than 1.5 million households will see a rise in food and energy bills that will outstrip their disposable income. That means a quarter of a million more families sliding into destitution. Of course, the Bank of England already expects inflation to reach double figures and fears that a recession is on its way. This situation is unprecedented and it demands urgent action from the Government, but none appears to be forthcoming. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing this debate and I hope that the Minister can take away some suggestions for the Chancellor.

I want to focus in particular on the poverty premium. The rising cost of living hits those on the lowest incomes the most, through what is known as the poverty premium, which is a term for the hidden costs of poverty. Why does it exist? There are a number of reasons. Ideas about the fairness of essential products and services are based on an idealised version of the average person as a super-consumer. A super-consumer never becomes ill, always has a steady income that is sufficient to meet their outgoings, is able to understand all terms and

[Emma Hardy]

conditions, and always has the time, energy and resources to shop around for and find the best deal. Clearly, that is a long way from reality for most people. There is a disconnect between policy makers and regulators, and the everyday experience of poverty and exclusion. This idealised consumer plays a role in that disconnect, as does the growing lack of social mobility, which means that an increasing number of policy and decision makers have no first-hand knowledge of what choices are actually like for someone experiencing hardship.

The ideological belief is that competition can meet all consumer needs and that freedom of choice exists for everybody. Even though we have seen markets fail time and again, with disastrous consequences, this nonsense is still held as an article of faith by the current Government. The question, then, is this: if the market is king, what happens to those people the market does not want? What that means is that policies and regulations are failing to acknowledge reality or to meet the needs of this large section of our population for whom the market does not wish to provide.

The poverty premium means, for example, that if someone cannot afford a direct debit bill for fuel payments and their income is uncertain, they pay more. If they are put on a prepayment meter because of problems paying the bill, they pay more. If they cannot afford to buy items in bulk or take advantage of multi-buy offers, they pay more. If they have an insecure income or a non-salaried job and they need a loan or credit card, they pay more. If they live in a deprived area and need car insurance to get to work, they pay more. That all adds up to extra costs that have a huge impact on those living in low-income households.

A study by Fair By Design shows that some households in places such as Hull face a poverty premium of £490. That is equivalent to 14 weeks of shopping—at least it was at the time of the study, but we expect that that sum will only have gone up. We can guarantee that, with inflation rising, the poverty premium is increasing all the time, such that the amount of food that people can buy is decreasing.

Whenever solutions to the poverty premium are proposed, or whenever questions are raised, the buck is passed between different Government Departments and regulators, and we go back to the earlier point—namely, that the market will provide. However, markets are not designed to be inclusive, and they do not have the necessary policies and guidance to achieve that. Therefore, the products that they provide are not designed to be inclusive either.

The good news, however, is that there is an opportunity to change this situation. The proposed financial services and markets Bill provides an opportunity to ensure that the Financial Conduct Authority “must have regard” to financial inclusion. A “must have regard” requirement would not pull the regulator into carrying out social policy, but ensure that the FCA has a statutory requirement to consider financial inclusion issues across all its work, wherever appropriate. It would also require the FCA to obtain the evidence it needs on market failures around financial inclusion, so that it can determine the areas of most detriment, how those issues can be resolved and which bodies are best placed to resolve them.

It is important to stress that neither the new consumer duty on which the FCA is currently consulting nor its consumer vulnerability guidance will address the situation, because both primarily deal with the treatment and the experience of consumers who already have access to those retail products, not the people I am talking about who are priced out of essential services because of the poverty premium. The only way to ensure that low-income or vulnerable customers can access essential services and products is to give the FCA a clear remit on financial inclusion.

This is a cost-free measure—it would not cost anyone anything. I will table amendments based on financial inclusion and I urge the Government, the Minister and all Members here to work with me in supporting them.

2.56 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing this important debate and on the powerful way in which he articulated the arguments in his speech.

I want to focus on one issue: the need to replace council tax with a proportional property tax. I want to demonstrate the inherent unfairness of council tax. I have some figures that I hope the Minister will find interesting, as they compare my constituency with hers. A proportional property tax would help families to address the cost of living crisis. It would also support the Government’s levelling up agenda and protect those on low incomes who may be disadvantaged by the reforms. I will explain how that will work.

I start by highlighting that 77% of households—more than 18 million—would benefit through a proportional property tax, with the average household saving £556 every year. A proportional property tax would replace council tax, bedroom tax and stamp duty. Outside London, regional economies would benefit from an overall reduction in property taxes of £6.5 billion, which would be a substantial stimulus for communities in need of levelling up and support those communities most in need. For example, under a proportional property tax my constituents would gain, on average, £900 a year compared with council tax. In the Minister’s South East Cambridgeshire constituency, two thirds of households would save money under a proportional property tax, averaging £350 a year. I hope this is something on which there could be cross-party consensus.

If we look at the effect on the constituency of the Minister’s colleague, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the right hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), we will see that his constituents would receive almost £900 a year, similar to the amount that would be received by my constituents. Most people would benefit from this policy.

2.38 pm

Suspended for a Division in the House.

3.11 pm

On resuming—

Grahame Morris: As I was saying before the Division, most people would benefit from the policy of moving from council tax to a proportional property tax. It is

certainly true that there will be a small minority of cases where people on a low income but living in a high-value property could struggle, but that is perfectly possible to mitigate at the point of transition. Those struggling to pay the increase could have any rise capped at £100 a month. For those still unable to pay, options could be made available to defer payment until they can afford to pay or until the property is sold.

Council tax is unfair and the inequalities are stark. A £3 million property in Wandsworth pays less than 0.1% of its property value in council tax. We can contrast that with my constituency, where the average household pays more than 2% of the property value in council tax.

A simple system would also reduce admin costs by up to £400 million a year. The tax levied would reflect current property values, instead of the values as they were in 1991. Councils would no longer be forced to chase down council tax debts from people who were unable to pay, as payment can be deferred under a proportional property tax until the sale of the property.

Council tax is one of the most unfair and regressive taxes, taking a disproportionate amount from communities and individuals that can ill afford to pay but that often have a much higher demand for council services. Will the Minister explain why the current system of council tax is fairer than a proportional property tax? If she cannot, will she make the case for change to the Chancellor? I ask my Front Bench, in all humility, to reach out to the Fairer Share campaign. I would be delighted to facilitate a meeting. I think there will be substantial electoral dividends for the political party or parties willing to pick up the baton of a proportional property tax to replace council tax and include it in their manifesto at the next election.

3.13 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on his excellent opening remarks and on securing this debate.

There is a tide of poverty, terrifyingly large, growing in every single community in our country. I wonder what the point of this place is if we do not seek to meet the needs of people who literally cannot see how they can put food on the table for their children, pay their bills or pay their rent or mortgage. It is a crisis like no other facing this country.

I will focus my remarks on how that tide of poverty is affecting rural communities such as mine in Cumbria and elsewhere in the country. In my constituency, we have incredibly low unemployment—very low. Pretty much everybody I know, particularly those on low wages, are working multiple jobs. The idea that they can do extra hours or get a better-paid job is a colossal insult to them, as they work tirelessly to provide for their families. The massive majority of people in receipt of universal credit in our communities in Westmoreland, South Lakeland and Eden are in work. They work incredibly hard, but their wages do not keep pace with the rapidly rising cost of living.

The cost of living in an area such as ours is exacerbated by the cost of housing. The average house price in my constituency is about £270,000 and the average household

income is about £26,000. Do the maths: nobody on an average income can afford anything like an average home in our community. There is extra pressure, because the pandemic has massively increased the housing need in our area. We have seen the absolute evaporation of the long-term private rented market into the holiday let market. In my community, there has been a 32% rise in one year in the number of homes going into the holiday let sector. What were those holiday lets beforehand? They were people's homes—family homes. People were evicted via section 21s—something the Government said they would abolish in their manifesto—and the availability of properties for those families to live in was diminished.

In parts of Devon, there has been a 70% reduction in the availability of long-term lets that are affordable to local families. It feels like the lakeland clearances are going on in our community. In Ambleside, a couple, both of whom worked, with children in the local school, were given their marching orders—they were evicted via section 21 from the rented property they had lived in for several years. There was nowhere else available in their community to rent, as everything else had gone to Airbnb or become a second home, so they had to give up their jobs, their children had to be removed from their school, and the family had to move to the next county in order to start all over again. It is miserable, and the consequence for our economy is huge.

What does it mean for our workforce? In the dales town of Sedburgh, which is a relatively small place, with fewer than 2,000 houses, there were 103 job vacancies as of last week because there is nowhere affordable for anybody on a modest, moderate, average or low income to rent, never mind buy—that is for the birds in the current era. That impacts on business. Some of the poorest people I know in communities such as mine run their own businesses. They pay and keep their staff—they cannot recruit enough staff—and they pay themselves less than the minimum wage. They live on next to nothing; they live in poverty.

Another huge problem that affects rural communities such as mine is fuel costs. Many of my constituents are not on the mains, so there are no energy price caps, no matter how high and ridiculous the prices are for people who run their property off liquid gas or oil. If someone wants to get the bus just one way from Kendal to Ambleside to get to their job, they have to spend more than an hour's pay. Likewise, fuel costs are much more impactful when people have to travel miles and miles. My hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) also mentioned the huge impact on the care sector. We cannot recruit people to care for people in their homes.

We cannot miss the impact that the Government's fiscal policies are having on farming. This year the Government are taking 20% of farm incomes without replacing them for 98% of the farmers in my community. That has an impact on rural poverty in communities such as mine throughout Cumbria. It also impacts on our ability as a country to produce food, and that means rising food prices for everybody else. It is morally wrong and incredibly stupid.

Of course the Government should be taxing the energy companies and redistributing that money to ensure that people are not in penury. Of course they should be

[Tim Farron]

cutting VAT to help people. The bottom line is that press releases will not pay bills. The Government need to act now.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will now impose a four-minute limit on Back Benchers, and I will call the SNP spokesman no later than 3.41 pm.

3.19 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for bringing forward today's debate.

I will always recall Mo Mowlam telling the story of a pensioner who came to her surgery, put their pension book in front of her and laid out the bills they had to pay—the sums did not add up. When Labour came to power, we restored respect and dignity to people and made a difference to them. We never thought we would return to the days in that story, but we have—and worse. When my constituents make hard choices because their bills and income do not add up, they too struggle to understand how they will get through the next three months, let alone the autumn and winter. They are having to make those hard choices every day, making pristine accounts and budgets just in order to survive. One constituent debated whether she would end going to the day centre, her only social contact. Another said that, when she went to the food bank, she had to select foods that did not require cooking. Those are real choices that my constituents are making right now.

If the bill drops through the door, and you dare to open it before reaching for help, your mind is in the echo room, with your mental resilience evaporated. That was the case for one of my constituents when they fell short by £3.45 on their utilities bill. That spiralled out of control and did not end well. That is the reality that people are living in. As many hon. Members have said, the Government have solutions in their hands, if only they would see this as a priority.

Wages are so low that people cannot survive on them. These are the people who never received those promised pay increases, particularly in the public sector, which did not even get 1%. Meanwhile, people paid themselves profits in the many multibillion-pound companies that benefited from Government handouts during the pandemic. The Government need to put the money where it will make the greatest difference. People will spend that money in the local economy, which is how we can get the economy moving. The pay remits should focus on those at the bottom of the pay scales, ensuring that they get not just percentage increases, which benefit the best paid in the workplace.

I, too, want to concentrate on housing. In York, we have a low-wage economy but an extortionately high cost of living because of the housing crisis. The house price to earnings ratio in York is 8.21 and rising. The rental cost figures published just this week show a rise of 10.2% over the past year, averaging £945 a month—35% of people's income. We need rent controls to hold down those rents. People are not only using their hard-earned money to pay for a roof over their head, but that money is being extracted from the local economy.

We have seen family homes, which people would have bought and lived in in the past, being bought by investors who turn them into Airbnb lets. We have lost 1,785 homes into the Airbnb market, extracting more money out of our local area. We need those reforms now, to stop the crisis getting worse.

3.23 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing the debate.

My constituency, a place I am proud to represent, is the 38th most deprived in the UK. We have a wage crisis, a job crisis and a housing crisis. Now we have a Tory-made cost of living crisis, which my constituents literally cannot afford. It is a major issue, and it is filling my constituency mailbag and, I am sure, those of other Members. A recent survey by 38 Degrees found that it is the No. 1 issue facing constituents: 80% faced higher bills, 76% faced higher petrol prices, and 24% have lost income due to the universal credit cut. I wish I could stop there, but the testimony is even more telling. A constituent who wished to remain anonymous said:

"I am a pensioner with a lung health problem. I cannot afford to heat my home, which makes the health problem require greater medical attention, putting more strain on the NHS."

Petrol is becoming almost unaffordable. In just eight months, a tank of petrol has gone up by roughly £17.50, so 5p off fuel duty will not begin to cut it. In areas such as mine, people are dependent on cars, because we have poor public transport links. As a result, the only affordable option has now become incredibly expensive. As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central said, we must ask the Treasury to rethink the mileage cost allowance, at least for public sector workers, and to abolish hospital car parking charges.

The Bank of England is predicting a recession, interest rates will go up, as will the energy cap in October and again in 2023, and the inflation rate could pass 10%—the list goes on. There is so much that the Government could do but have refused to. Labour has called for a windfall tax to provide support to households. We could increase universal credit back to what it was throughout the pandemic, and cancel the national insurance rise. Those are measures that the Government could take, but they are refusing to do so.

Short-term policy responses will not put money into the pockets of working people; only a long-term plan to address the crisis will do so. The war in Ukraine has shown how important energy security is. We need to invest in renewables and nuclear energy, as the Labour party has pushed for, to end our dependency on foreign nations. That would create proper jobs on a living wage. We also need to invest heavily in our infrastructure—trams, trains and metros—to create further economic effects and to green up our nation. Again, that will create jobs.

As I find myself saying time and time again, this is an issue not of how but of political will. Sadly, I think it is an issue that the Government will continue to avoid, while the Opposition parties rightfully make the case for proper support. Our constituents are suffering; it is about time that the Government did something to help them. It is not surprising that no Conservative Back Benchers are present—they know that what is happening is indefensible.

3.26 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on securing what is an extremely timely debate, given that this is the biggest issue facing our country and our constituents.

The cost of living crisis is causing great hardship in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, and right across the country. We desperately need measures to tackle it and, at the very least, an emergency Budget that introduces a windfall tax to bring people's bills down now. Yesterday's news that the energy cap could increase to £2,800 in the autumn is truly frightening.

The Government do not seem to have a plan. During the Queen's Speech debate, the Prime Minister hinted that help would be announced "in the coming days", only for the Treasury to announce in the following hours that that was not the case. That is an example of the lack of a joined-up approach across Government.

Recently, I met my local citizens advice bureau, which highlighted growing hardship across the constituency. I was alarmed to hear that overall client numbers have doubled in recent months. Queries about energy have increased by 250%, which is evidence of the fuel poverty crisis, and are now mainly about support to pay fuel bills. Debt numbers have increased by 200%, and council tax debt is now the biggest issue. That is worrying, as those are household debts. Probably most worrying, however, is the massive increase—more than 500%—in requests for food bank vouchers and other charitable support. My local food banks operate in challenging times and, on a number of occasions recently, have come close to running out of food, given the huge demand.

The fact that nothing in the Queen's Speech tackled this growing crisis demonstrates that the Government are not listening or, if they are, that they are failing to act, which shows a shameful lack of compassion. A windfall tax would be a start. As we have heard, it is grossly offensive that energy giants are announcing their highest ever profits—recently, Shell announced profits of more than £7 billion in the first quarter of the year—and yet the Government have so far refused to implement a windfall tax. At the same time, people are struggling to choose between heating and eating. The Government must rethink their approach. We need a proper plan, and we need it now.

We also know that many public service workers are out of pocket from just doing their jobs. Many use their cars to do their job, such as care workers and social workers, who visit vulnerable adults and children. They are now repaid less than what they spend on petrol, thanks to the out-of-date HMRC mileage rates. I support the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central to review those rates.

It is clear that public sector pay is also key to levelling up, as public sector workers make up one in seven employees in every region of the UK. In the north-east, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, increasing public sector pay would provide a boost to the economic regeneration of the country, given that we are seeing the steepest drop in living standards since the 1950s. The Government have levers at their disposal, and they must use all of them to help ease the huge pressure on

thousands of families across the country. Talk on this issue simply is not enough; we need action, and we need it now. I look forward to the Minister's response and hope that she can demonstrate that the Government will act, and act quickly.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I am afraid I will have to reduce the limit again, to three minutes. I call Jim Shannon.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you for calling me, Mr Twigg. I am very pleased to speak in the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) on leading it and setting the scene.

I will give some examples of how the cost of living crisis is affecting my constituents. There are people in my constituency who have to choose between putting on their heating and feeding their children. Increasingly, they have to decide whether they can help their widowed, elderly parent to heat their home as well. These decisions are happening in my constituency each and every day, and I have no doubt whatever that they are the same everywhere else.

Inflation has reached its highest rate since 1982, and gas prices have increased by 95%. Consumer prices are up by 9%, electricity prices are up by 54%, and 11% of the working-age population of Northern Ireland live in absolute poverty, so I look to the Minister for help. A constituent has informed me that she pays her gas bill by direct debit, which means that if she does not put the money in, she does not get gas. She has gone from paying £54 a month to £178 a month, and her electricity bill has risen three times in the past year. She and her husband both work full time, and even with her husband's second job it is impossible to make ends meet. I would probably refer to them as the middle-class poor. She has a seven-year-old, who is a talented young musician. Even if the violin is rented, there is still money to be spent on the girl. My constituent is on the threshold for aid, but the Government have refused to lift the threshold in line with inflation, and she simply does not have the money.

At a time when costs are skyrocketing, people in employment are paying more national insurance than ever before and it cannot be sustained. After the luxury of a music lesson, there is a school visit, the school play or other essential extracurricular activities. The middle-class working poor have been under incredible pressure for the last few months, but they are even more so now. Those currently earning above £25,000 will pay more national insurance contributions and income tax after 2022-23. The Government keep on telling us that they are helping, but would they consider delaying the increased payments for now, given that it would have a significant impact on workers who are already struggling? The Ofgem chief has referred to the energy price cap, which is expected to rise by £830 and reach £2,800 in October. Again, we need reassurances about the long-term strategy to enable us to get beyond the next six months.

No longer are working families saving to go on a foreign holiday or putting in new kitchen cupboards. They are living from hand to mouth. As that is the case, I believe that the Government can and must intercede in a constructive and practical way. I have asked about delaying the increase in national insurance contributions,

[Jim Shannon]

and I have asked for a six-month strategy to enable people to have some idea of what the costs will be. In the next six months, prices will rise by £600.

3.33 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for his excellent work in securing the debate, and for his powerful speech.

In the time allowed, I would like to raise three key points about the cost of living crisis that is facing families and pensioners throughout the country—first, to raise some matters relating to my constituency; secondly, to point out some of the additional pressures on public service workers and key workers; and thirdly, to call for a robust response from the Government.

I will start with the points about my constituency. For Members who do not know Reading and the neighbouring town of Woodley, we are lucky to have a buoyant local economy. However, wealth is not spread evenly throughout our community, and many people live in older properties, which are very hard to heat. We have a large number of Victorian terraces, which are attractive to look at but very costly to the residents.

I want to highlight a couple of powerful cases that have come into my office. More than 60 people have contacted me and my team in the past few weeks about the cost of living crisis, which illustrates that this crisis is being felt everywhere, including in the south-east of England.

The first instance is of a woman who is a teaching assistant, who contacted my team in February in deep financial distress. Before the hike in energy bills, she was already struggling to make ends meet. Her take-home pay at that point was around £1,600 a month, but the cost of renting in our area was £1,150. She is extremely worried about the dramatic rise in her energy bills and, as a single parent, is very concerned about looking after her son.

I heard from another constituent—a young man living in a shared house—who is also single. He describes himself as working full time “on an OK wage,” meaning that he is not entitled to any kind of benefits. With rising costs, especially after the update in energy prices, his monthly bills are already above his earnings. He has spoken to his employer, who has very kindly listened and tried to respond, and he is due to get a pay rise. However, that will still not be enough to make ends meet. At the moment he is having to dip into his savings to cope, which is obviously not sustainable.

These cases show the scale of what we are facing around the country, including in areas with quite a buoyant economy. They highlight the need for urgent Government action.

My second point is about the particular pressures facing public service workers and key workers. I am sure that everyone across the House would agree on the vital role that those workers have played during the past couple of years. Whether that is our wonderful NHS, teachers, police officers or people working in supermarkets, it is absolutely incredible what they have taken us through, and I ask the Minister to consider the position they face.

3.37 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Today, I want to make a proposal. We have heard a lot recently about a windfall tax. We have even heard that the Prime Minister might be about to U-turn and deliver one. To make a real difference to people's lives, it must raise serious funds, so today I call for £10 billion to be raised via a windfall tax on North sea oil and gas giants to help deal with the cost of living emergency.

Let us be clear: people's bills are so high because North sea oil and gas companies are making vast excess profits. Those excess profits are not the result of innovation or extra investments; they are an undeserved and unexpected windfall that has come about simply because oil and gas prices have spiked as a result of the horrific war in Ukraine.

We have a choice. Either oil and gas companies continue to make eye-watering levels of excess profits or we use a windfall tax to help people through this crisis. Using figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility, we can estimate that North sea oil and gas companies will make post-tax profits of £15 billion in the financial years 2021-22 and 2022-23, which is almost £13 billion more than they would have made based on their average annual post-tax profits in the three years before 2020-21, when oil and gas prices started to increase. I therefore think it perfectly reasonable for £10 billion of that £13 billion to go to the taxpayer.

Before we hear the claim that such a tax would undermine investments, let us remember that BP has even admitted that a windfall tax would not affect its planned investments. Of course, some in the Conservative party who put profit before people may scream and shout about such a plan. However, the truth is that this is an emergency that people are living through, and in that context we need emergency measures.

Of course, the level of windfall tax that I propose will not be enough by itself. We will need windfall taxes on the wider energy sector and across other sectors that are making excess profits. We will need price caps on key essentials and we will need wealth taxes. However, a windfall tax to raise £10 billion will make a real difference to people's lives, and we should get on with delivering it. The Government can and should do it. It is necessary and it is the right thing to do. They should get on with it now.

3.39 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am pleased to begin the summing up for this debate, Mr Twigg. I commend the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing the debate and for his introductory remarks. Given that he devoted a lot of his speech—a number of other Members have mentioned this—to the debt we owe public service workers, I hope I may crave Members' indulgence for a few seconds to give a shout out to one public sector worker in particular. Dr Fiona De Soya retires today after 37 years as an NHS doctor—31 and a half years at Leslie Medical Practice in my constituency. She is not planning to retire from the 38 years she has served so far as my wife. Obviously, I would rather be there, but my duty means that I have to be here.

The Bank of England Governor, Andrew Bailey, told the Treasury Committee that we should expect “apocalyptic” food price rises before the end of the year.

Archie Norman, the chairman of Marks & Spencer, said that food prices could rise by 10% this year, on top of the increases that we had already started to see last year. There are warnings that schools will have to cut the size of school meals to keep their budgets under control. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has reminded us that there is not a single rate of inflation; everyone has their own rate of inflation, and the poorer someone is, the bigger that inflation rate is. That is because, the poorer someone is, the more of their household money, by necessity, is spent on the things that are now spiralling out of control. Someone on an MP's salary does not have to spend three quarters of their money just to keep themselves and their family fed and warm. Someone on minimum wage—or below—does.

At the same time, the number of billionaires in the United Kingdom is the highest it has ever been. The wealthiest people in the United Kingdom saw their personal fortunes increase by 10% last year. We are very definitely not all in this together. While I have no question about the sincerity of all those who have spoken against Government policy today, I do need to gently point out to Labour colleagues that right now their party in Scotland is doing deals with the Tories, all over Scottish local government, to help the Tories have an influence that the voters of Scotland wanted to deny them at the ballot box in the first week of May. When we are talking about the iniquities of this Government at a UK level, why are some parties in Scotland putting the Tories into power to run, and all often probably ruin, local government services?

The Government's response so far has been nothing short of shocking. First, they pretend it is nothing to do with Brexit. They say that it is partly caused by the war in Ukraine, and that there is no doubt that covid has had a significant impact. Then somebody called "global" seems to get the blame for everything the Government get wrong these days. We have got a Chancellor who increases the burden of taxation and thinks it is a tax cut; a Chancellor who thought it was silly to give money to people who are poor to help them pay their bills; a Chancellor who tweets figures showing that the economy is shrinking and says, "Isn't it good that the economy is growing?"; a Chancellor who increases national insurance, knowing perfectly well that it will hit people who work for a living and benefit people who are able to make a fortune from investment and property ownership. I wonder who the Chancellor knows who might benefit from that.

Valid points were made about the inadequacy of mileage rates paid to a lot of public sector workers, but people who work in the private care sector very often do not even get those—they often have to pay their own mileage and drive on their own time between appointments. It is now widely leaked by the Government that there is an emergency package of support coming. We might even see a U-turn on the windfall tax, not because it is morally the right thing to do, but because they need something—anything—to keep the Prime Minister with his glass of beer off the front pages for the next couple of days. What an example! What a perfect metaphor for the utter iniquity of this Government that they will not spend money to help people because they need it, but they will spend public money on trying to keep the Prime Minister's misconduct off the pages of the newspapers.

What could they be doing? The windfall tax has been mentioned, and I am quite happy to support that in principle—not just for oil and gas companies, as has been mentioned, but for anybody who has made huge profits through good luck during the last two desperate years. The Government could follow the example of Germany, which has cut fuel duty five times as much as the United Kingdom. It is giving a €300 payment to everybody, plus €100 for every child. Ireland is giving a €200 energy rebate for everybody—not a loan that they have to pay back, but a grant. Belgium cut VAT on energy to 6%. That was something the Government told us we were not allowed to do when we were part of the European Union. How come Belgium was able to do that?

Scotland, without even the full powers of a normal nation, will be increasing the Scottish child payment by the end of the year to £25 per child. That has been described by the Child Poverty Action Group as a "game changer". The Scottish Government are currently spending more than £360 million above Barnett funding on benefits, including through seven new benefits that do not exist anywhere else in the UK. The Scottish Government were not set up to spend Scotland's money fixing the failures of the United Kingdom Government, but all too often, that is what they are having to do.

Poverty is not an essential part of today's life. Poverty is not inevitable in the United Kingdom today. The United Kingdom boasts about being one of the wealthiest nations—or collections of nations—anywhere in the world. Scotland certainly, and probably the United Kingdom in its entirety, is self-sufficient in energy. We could be self-sufficient in food if the food production and distribution system had not been so destroyed over the years. Energy companies are now warning that half of their customers will not be able to pay their bills by the end of the year. That is not essential; it is a deliberate political choice by a Government whose days are up.

3.46 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for securing and leading this extremely important and timely debate. He is a great champion for working people across this country. I thought his opening speech set out clearly the challenges that are facing his constituents, as well as all hon. Members' constituents, at this moment.

I would like to thank UNISON, a trade union I am proud to be a member of, for the briefings it provided in advance of this debate. I will come on shortly to how the cost of living crisis is affecting public sector workers. This has been a good debate, with hon. Members from across the House speaking with passion and sincerity about the impact of the cost of living crisis on their constituents. We have also heard repeated pleas to the Government to end their inaction and provide more support to the families who are really struggling. I will come on to some of these suggestion shortly.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) made some very important points about low pay, which I will address shortly. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) made an excellent speech on the poverty premium. I thought the point she made about the difference in cost

[Abena Oppong-Asare]

between direct debit and prepayment meters for energy was particularly relevant to the current situation. I hope the Minister will address that point directly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) made some interesting points about the taxation of property and possible reforms to how it is done. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) spoke about the particular challenges of rural poverty and the issue of second homes and Airbnb making the housing crisis worse. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about the housing crisis, particularly the challenges for renters and the knock-on effect on the rest of the economy. My hon. Friends the Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) set out some short and long-term solutions to the current crisis, including a windfall tax.

I totally agree that this is a matter of political will. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the impact of the increase in national insurance as well as energy prices on his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) gave some heart-wrenching examples of the struggles facing his constituents and public sector workers.

I want to start by setting out how this cost of living crisis is affecting workers, families and businesses. In recent weeks, we heard the news that inflation had hit a record 40-year high, rising to 9%. It is the highest one-year increase in consumer prices since records began. The average household energy bill has gone up by more than £1,000 this year. The food shop has gone up by 5% and the Bank of England has warned of further, “apocalyptic” food price rises. The cost of filling the car with petrol has jumped by £20 a time. Since January, 2 million people have gone a whole day without eating, because they cannot afford to eat.

We have heard awful accounts from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central, who shared stories on behalf of his constituents. I know some of my constituents cannot even afford a bus fare to get to the food bank to receive help. I am sure that each and every hon. Member will have similar stories in their inbox.

As well as rising prices, there is a wage crisis in this country. Weekly pay for a full-time worker is expected to reach £652 by 2023, but if weekly pay had grown in line with inflation since 2010, it would have reached £695 by 2023. The last 12 years of Tory Government have seen pay squeezed, costing workers hundreds of pounds a year, even before the Tory tax rises. As several hon. Members have mentioned, the pay squeeze has also hit public sector workers. Stories of NHS workers having to use food banks are shameful. They and other key workers kept our country going through the darkest days of the pandemic.

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central set out some of the specific challenges facing public sector workers, including HMRC-approved mileage rates falling behind the cost of driving and charging staff to park in NHS car parks. I hope that the Minister can address these important issues when she responds. Public sector workers deserve better from this Government on pay and other workforce issues, including workload, progression and staff wellbeing.

Of course, the cost of living crisis has also hit businesses. Consumer confidence is at an all-time low and businesses’ costs have rocketed. The cost of living crisis is adding to 12 years of low economic growth. In fact, over 12 years growth has averaged just 1.4%—the worst record of any Government since the second world war.

That is a cost of living crisis, a wage crisis and an economic growth crisis all at the same time, and what is the Government’s response? So far I have heard nothing except more dither and delay. Reports suggesting that the Chancellor is considering some form of windfall tax are all well and good, but we have been calling for that for months. Where is the urgency from the Government? Where is the recognition that people need help now? It is simply not good enough. We have said that the Government should bring forward an emergency Budget to deal with the immediate crisis, and that it should contain five priorities to make material difference to millions of workers and their families.

First, we have called for a windfall tax on oil and gas producers in order to cut home energy bills. The arguments for a windfall tax have been well stated by hon. Members today, so I will simply say that when leading business figures, charities and politicians from across the political spectrum are urging the Government to get on with this and do it, there is simply no excuse. We believe that the windfall tax should be used to remove VAT on domestic energy bills and expand and increase the warm home discount. That will save most households around £200, but those who most need it could save £600.

Secondly, we have called for support for struggling businesses through a discount on business rates for small and medium-sized enterprises, to be funded by a tax on online giants. Thirdly, the Government must scrap the national insurance increases, which are hitting workers at the worst possible time. This is not the time to implement a national insurance increase.

Fourthly, we need a clear plan to ramp up home insulation and upgrades, making homes more energy efficient and saving households, on average, £400 every year. Fifthly, we have said that the Government must go after the fraudsters who stole from the public during the pandemic. Why are the Government not allowing the National Crime Agency to investigate the £11.8 billion lost to tax from fraud? That money could have been used to help people out of hardship right now. These five policies would make a real difference to workers and families across the country.

To conclude, unlike the party opposite, Labour has a plan to put money back into people’s pockets, grow the economy, boost jobs and wages and tackle this terrible cost of living crisis. We are still waiting for the Government’s plan but we cannot wait very much longer. Now is the time for action and for a windfall tax, and to finally give the people the help they need.

3.54 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for organising this important debate, and all Members for their valuable contributions.

Hon. Members have set out the concerns and struggles of their constituents. I assure hon. Members and their constituents that the Government absolutely recognise

that families up and down the country are facing an unprecedented cost of living challenge at the moment. We understand that the cost of food is rising and that the cost of goods going up is hitting people's pockets. It would be wrong of me to pretend that these issues are going to subside. We all know that the next few months are going to be difficult. I know that people are really worried. It would also be wrong of me to suggest that the Government can wave a magic wand and that there is some quick fix that no one has thought of to reverse all the price rises that are happening at the moment. These are global trends and they are driven by global challenges.

We recognise that these are serious issues facing our society, as the hon. Members for Barnsley Central and for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) said. We are doing a significant amount. We have already done a significant amount to help the many families that hon. Members have spoken about. We have provided £22 billion of direct support to families grappling with the cost of living pressures, including the £1,000 that people on universal credit will get or the £1,000 that people on the national living wage will get, through the changes that we have made to those measures. Our support includes £9 billion of energy support to ensure that fuel duty is cut, and the council tax rebates of £150 for band A to D payers in England, as well as the warm home discount, which we have expanded to £150, and the £1 billion of household support that people are getting through their local authorities.

I recognise that it is important not just to talk about statistics or investment in global terms; we recognise that the cost of living pressures are affecting individual families. I listened very carefully to the hon. Member for Barnsley Central when he spoke about a public sector worker on universal credit who was struggling. I emphasise that a low-earning family with one adult working and two children under five will be £1,610 better off a year as a result of the recent changes we have made to national insurance contributions and the universal credit taper rate.

Peter Grant: Has the Minister bothered to work out how much of that £1,600 has disappeared in increased food and fuel bills since the announcement was made?

Lucy Frazer: Obviously, different people will experience different rises in the cost of living, depending on their circumstances. We absolutely recognise the rising cost of living, which is why we have already made a number of changes.

I will move on to the point that the hon. Member for Barnsley Central made about public sector pay, as did the hon. Members for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) by analogy. I recognise the important work that public sector workers have been doing during the pandemic and in the ordinary course of business, helping to support our world-class public services. Hon. Members will know that last year's spending review confirmed that public sector workers will see pay rises across the whole spending review period from 2022-23 to 2024-25. Pay for most frontline workforces, including nurses, teachers, the armed forces and police officers, is set through an independent pay review body. We will consider all recommendations from pay review bodies this summer, once those final reports are submitted.

I also point out that many public sector workers will benefit from the increase in the national living wage that I mentioned. Two million people, many of them public sector workers, will benefit from that.

The approved mileage allowance payments, which the hon. Members for Barnsley Central and for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) raised, reflect all the running costs of a vehicle, including fuel and other vehicle expenses, such as servicing, insurance and depreciation; fuel is only about a third of the cost included in the rate. It is up to an employer what expenses they pay their employees. They do not have to use the allowance payment amounts, and can instead agree to reimburse the actual cost incurred. Individuals are not liable to pay tax on the difference as long as they can provide evidence of the expenditure. As with all taxes and allowances, we keep the rate under review.

The hon. Member for Barnsley Central talked about NHS car parking charges. I am pleased that he recognised that NHS staff working night shifts benefit from no car parking charges, as do disabled people, frequent out-patient attenders and parents of sick children staying overnight, but I am happy to look into the matter further with officials.

I listened carefully to the ideas raised by the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden), for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), and for Easington (Grahame Morris). I have previously spoken to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about the housing issue he raised. I valued that conversation, and I thank him for raising those points again.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said that Labour restored people's dignity, but the latest data shows that, compared with 2009-10, there are now 2 million fewer people in absolute poverty. The Chancellor, the Government and I are very proud of that statistic. I am very proud that, when Conservative Governments are in office—particularly this one—we have record unemployment, which allows people to earn a wage and support their families, whereas every single Labour Government has left office with unemployment higher than when they entered it.

I have set out a number of the measures that we have already taken to support people with the cost of living, which we absolutely recognise. We are also taking steps to boost the UK's economy. I have not got time to go into all the measures today, but hon. Members know that the Chancellor has set out a long-term plan to boost the economy through capital, people and ideas, building on the progress that we have already made in this area.

Emma Hardy: Before the Minister sits down, I want to push her a little further on financial inclusion. Will she meet me and the campaign group Fair By Design to look at the FCA's remit with regard to financial inclusion and how we can reduce the poverty premium for people with the least money?

Lucy Frazer: I or another Minister would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss that.

We are helping to deal with the cost of living, but the only way out of the rising inflation that we face is to grow the economy more broadly, and that is what we are doing. I reiterate that the Government stand ready

[Lucy Frazer]

to do more to support people across the UK who are struggling with cost of living pressures. We will take action to ease these burdens, where we can, in the short term, while exercising responsible economic leadership to deliver the conditions we need to prepare the UK economy for the future.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I call Dan Jarvis to wind up.

4.4 pm

Dan Jarvis: This has been a very useful and timely debate. Again, I thank Unison for the support that it has provided and for the work that it does. I also thank hon. Members for their contributions. Although minds have rightly been focused on the terrible time that many of our constituents are having with the cost of living crisis, the reality, as some hon. Members have commented upon, is that what we are actually talking about is the grinding effects of poverty, which many of us have known about for a very long time indeed.

In this debate we have heard concerns expressed about really important issues such as low pay, pensions, the poverty premium, reform of council tax, windfall tax, the cost of parking, the cost of mileage, housing costs, fuel costs, transport costs and a number of other things as well. I think that hon. Members have made a significant number of sensible and reasonable suggestions, and I very much hope that the Minister will think on them and that the Government will act at pace.

The Minister mentioned that she had worked with her officials to look specifically at the issue of NHS parking charges. I would be very grateful if she wrote to me with her conclusions following the piece of work on that issue that she said she would do.

Finally, although the Government of course have a crucial role to play, I will take this brief opportunity to recognise the very important contribution being made by the charitable and voluntary sector, which, as it always does, has stepped up to support those who are in crisis. In particular, I will just put on the record my thanks to the wonderful British Heart Foundation shop in Barnsley, which I had the pleasure of visiting last Friday. The staff there and the staff in charity shops right across the country are doing amazing work during these very difficult times, providing brilliant service and good-quality products at an affordable price. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the fiscal approach to tackling rises in the cost of living.

India's Foreign Contribution Law: NGOs

4.7 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will call the Member to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of India's foreign contribution law on NGOs.

I am very pleased to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Twigg.

This time last year, India had a devastating covid surge. By 6 May 2021, the country had recorded over 400,000 covid cases. Oxfam India, which was founded in India by the British charity Oxfam, provided urgent supplies and support. It worked with India's health departments, district administrations and local organisations, and its staff set up oxygen plants, provided ventilators and delivered food to vulnerable communities. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, was among those who praised the response to the pandemic by civil society organisations, and Oxfam India played a key part in that response.

Yet in January this year, the charity received some very bad news. The renewal of its Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act licence had been refused; the decision was apparently made last December. The result is that Oxfam India is no longer able to receive funds from abroad. Its annual income will fall from around €15 million to €2.1 million; at least 11 of its 15 development projects will close; and its former reach of over 1.5 million people, mainly Dalits, indigenous populations, minorities, women and girls, will be drastically cut. No explanation for this decision has been given.

Charities and non-governmental organisations in receipt of foreign funding in India must be registered under the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act 2010—the FCRA—which regulates how foreign funding can be received. Charities and NGOs now need to operate through a designated FCRA account at the State Bank of India's main branch in Delhi. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, local human rights monitoring groups say the purpose of that is to supervise and monitor NGOs' activity. The Act now gives the Government huge powers to inquire into what NGOs are doing, each time putting their work on hold until the inquiry is complete.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. On 6 January this year Members highlighted another charity, the Missionaries of Charity, who were reinstated some days after the debate. Organisations such as Oxfam, Greenpeace and Compassion are also affected. Some of the NGOs are of Christian heritage and some have a Muslim background. Some 250 Hindu NGOs have been closed because they are anti-Government. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree with me that this is an early warning bell of increased human rights abuses in India? It harms India's poorest and is a symptom of the continuing pressure from Hindu nationalism.

Stephen Timms: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that. It seems clear that the FCRA is being used to make life difficult for organisations that from time to time might be critical of the Government. In 2016, a commission appointed by the UN Human Rights Council called for the repeal of the Act, but in 2020 it was tightened up even further on the grounds of bringing greater accountability.

Of course, what is happening to NGOs is part of a wider pattern in India. We all grew up thinking of India as the greatest democracy on the planet. The briefing for this debate from the all-party parliamentary human rights group is absolutely right to refer to

“India’s rich tradition and constitutional status as a secular democracy.”

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I was simply stunned when the reputable organisation Amnesty was forced to close its office in India. The suffocation of minority rights and the lack of freedom of expression has also been illustrated by the ongoing conflict in Kashmir, the farmers’ protest and the persecution of minorities, as has been mentioned, including the Christians and the Dalits. Today, Mohammed Yasin Malik and other leaders have been sentenced to life, and their only crime is wanting freedom from Indian illegal occupation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that India is a diminishing democracy?

Stephen Timms: I do agree with that. The situation is very worrying. I remember vividly the pride of Muslim constituents with roots in India, their home country, when I was first elected, but that has all drastically changed. There have been new laws to make things difficult specifically for Muslim citizens. Our Prime Minister’s state visit to India last month took place against a backdrop of inter-religious violence in Delhi and the demolition of Muslim-owned buildings.

The Christian charity, Open Doors, which launches its watchlist every year in Parliament, now designates India as the tenth worst country in the world in which to be a Christian. It has been sliding down other indices as well. It is ranked 150 out of 180 countries in the latest World Press Freedom index. Freedom House ranked India as only “partly free” in its Freedom in the World report this year, noting that:

The constitution guarantees civil liberties including freedom of expression and freedom of religion, but harassment of journalists...NGOs...and other government critics has increased significantly”.

The Economist Intelligence Unit’s latest Democracy Index categorises India as a “flawed democracy”. Civicus, the Johannesburg-headquartered global civil society alliance, categorises Indian civil society as “repressed”, which is the second worst category in its ranking, having downgraded in 2019. Not one of those indices proves there is a problem, but the overall message that they all convey is unmistakable.

The 2020 changes to the FCRA have effectively banned NGOs from research, advocacy and campaigning. They have also created new bureaucratic and practical hurdles, a ban on NGOs transferring funds to other NGOs, other restrictions on fund distribution, a cap on administrative costs, and delays from the necessity of additional form filling. It is claimed that all of that is to strengthen transparency and accountability, but it is fairly clear that the Government are targeting charities and non-profits that question their policies. Will the

Minister urge the Indian authorities to review carefully the FCRA for compliance with international human rights standards and to suspend aspects of the law that restrict charities from providing urgently needed relief?

The Centre for Promotion of Social Concerns is a prominent human rights organisation in India. It lost its licence under the FCRA in 2016. The Ministry of Home Affairs said that was on the basis of a field agency report. The group challenged the decision in the High Court and, in the Ministry’s evidence to the court, it complained that the organisation used foreign funding to pass information to United Nations special rapporteurs and to foreign embassies, that that was

“portraying India’s human rights record in negative light...to the detriment of India’s image”,

and that such acts were

“undesirable activities detrimental to national interest”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) was right to draw attention to Amnesty International being forced to put an end to its covid support. The head of Amnesty International India said at the time:

“Even if you’re working on Covid, the law makes it very difficult for you to be able to even accept foreign aid coming in without being in violation of the law”.

Greenpeace, too, has lost its licence. The Ford Foundation has been suspended. NGOs from other overseas countries are telling their own Governments how hard this is making things for them.

Oxfam—I started with this case—has been sending help to India since 1951. Oxfam India became a fully Indian organisation in 2008. Today, it is one of the country’s largest NGOs, providing food, shelter, clothing, medicine and medical equipment. It was reaching more than 1.5 million people, but has now lost its FCRA licence, so that number will be reduced drastically. Oxfam India applied to renew its licence on 1 April last year, in good time, but it appears that the application was rejected on 15 December, although the organisation has received no official communication from the Indian Government about that decision. Now, it can only raise resources within India, but its previous income was 75% made up of foreign aid. A lot of staff will lose their jobs, and crucial humanitarian and social work has ended.

In the five years after the current Indian Government first took office in 2014, more than 14,000 NGOs were barred from accessing foreign funding, seemingly mainly to hamper criticism of Government policies. Nearly 6,000 did not have their FCRA licences renewed last year. One notable organisation affected, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out in his intervention, was the Missionaries of Charity, founded by Mother Teresa. It was blocked from accessing international funding on the grounds of “adverse inputs”, but nobody knows what that means, or what the problem with Mother Teresa’s charity was thought to be. As the hon. Gentleman rightly said, the decision has been reversed, which at least suggests that external pressure can help to deliver renewal of an FCRA licence.

Oxfam India applied well before the deadline. No reasons for the refusal were given, simply a statement that the decision had been taken in the “public interest”, but one of the problems is that the FCRA definition of “activities prejudicial to the public interest”

[Stephen Timms]

is extremely vague. Will the Minister seek from the Indian Government an explanation of why Oxfam India's activities are regarded as "not in the public interest"?

Oxfam India has now filed a petition to the Indian Government for a final administrative review. There has as yet been no response.

On 10 February, the permanent secretary at the Home Office, Sir Matthew Rycroft, raised this issue with his counterpart at the Indian Home Ministry. In response to my written question, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), said on 17 May:

"The Permanent Secretary addressed the difficulties that some NGOs in India have faced due to the enforcement of the FCRA, which is impacting both on the work we are funding and the work of UK-headquartered global NGOs in India."

I very much welcome the permanent secretary's intervention on this issue, but as I understand it, the Indian Government have given no assurances at all about whether these cases will be reviewed. There is clearly a lot more to do. In answering my question, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department said that the UK continues

"to monitor developments related to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, especially impacts on UK Government-funded programmes in India, and the work of British NGOs in India."

However, we need more than monitoring. I am sure the Minister will agree with me about the negative impact of the FCRA, and I ask her and her colleagues to press the Indian authorities to review the legislation and lift some of the restrictions. They should also press for greater transparency of FCRA licence determination.

I will finish with the words of Amitabh Behar—the chief executive of Oxfam India, whom I met on a recent Zoom seminar—about what is happening in India. He told the BBC:

"The Ministry of Home Affairs' decision to deny renewal of FCRA registration will severely hamper these collaborations which were providing relief to those who needed it the most during times of crisis."

I hope the Minister will be able to reassure us that Her Majesty's Government recognise the importance of this issue, and that the influence of her Department will be brought to bear in order to promote freedom of expression, even where it makes Governments uncomfortable at times.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): If it is helpful, Minister, the debate needs to finish by 16.43. It is a matter for you whether you take all the available time.

4.22 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): Thank you, Mr Twigg. Fortunately, I wrote down the time that we started, so I have had an eye on what time I need to sit down. It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, and I thank the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) for securing the debate. I also thank hon. Members who have contributed to it. It is always a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I think we have been in this Chamber several times over the last couple of days—and the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), and I will address some of the points that have been raised.

It is important to start by saying that the Government firmly believe that a vibrant civil society is central to any democracy. NGOs and civil society organisations in the UK and overseas make huge contributions by holding Governments to account and promoting respect for human rights. The Government support and work with a wide range of NGO partners through our programmes around the world, including in India. India is the world's largest democracy, and it has a proud democratic tradition and a history of inclusive government. As with all democracies, we look to work with the Government of India to uphold their democratic values, norms and principles.

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act, which is otherwise known as FCRA for the benefit of brevity, regulates how NGOs and other civil society organisations can receive foreign funding for their programmes and activities in India. Versions of the legislation have been in force since 1976. It was amended by the previous Government of India in 2010, and by the current Government of India in 2020. Any NGO that receives foreign funding now needs to apply for a FCRA registration number and renew its registration every five years. Since the FCRA was last amended, a number of NGOs have had their applications to renew foreign funding licences rejected, and I will talk about the number of cases in a moment. They include organisations with which we work directly, and it has had a significant impact on their ability to operate. As has been mentioned, some organisations, such as Missionaries of Charity, have succeeded in having their registration restored, but others have not. The UK's strong and growing partnership with the Government of India enables us to discuss concerns where we have them. We continue to believe that NGOs make a vital and positive contribution to society. As with all countries, we will always welcome more progress on these issues.

Through the British high commission in New Delhi, we monitor developments relating to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act. In particular, we look out for any impacts on UK Government-funded programmes and the work of British NGOs in India. We talk to the NGOs affected and encourage them to seek recourse, including through the Indian courts, where it is appropriate. We have also raised their cases with the Indian Government directly, at ministerial and senior official levels. That includes the issues faced by Oxfam India, the recent cancellation of the foreign funding licence of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, whose headquarters are in Delhi, and the freezing of Amnesty International India's bank accounts.

As mentioned by the right hon. Member for East Ham, in February the Home Office permanent secretary raised difficulties facing Oxfam India with his Indian counterpart, during our home affairs dialogue.

Jim Shannon: This has been a week where we have been regularly in debates, as the Minister knows. The figures are that 12,580 NGOs had their licences revoked. That is reaching almost epidemic proportions. Has the Minister had a chance to oversee that number of organisations? If so, is there a programme of trying to address all those 12,580 NGOs that have had their licences revoked? I do not expect an answer today.

Amanda Milling: The hon. Gentleman is passionate on so many different issues, particularly defending freedom of religion or belief. Regarding the number he referred

to, we do raise cases with the Government of India directly. I would happily pick this up after the debate and write to Members.

Jim Shannon: All three of us.

Amanda Milling: I will.

Stephen Timms: I welcome the intervention of the Home Office permanent secretary. Can the Minister tell us whether the case of Oxfam India has been taken up by Ministers, perhaps by the Prime Minister when he recently visited India?

Amanda Milling: With regard to the case of Oxfam India, the British high commissioner to India met with the CEO of Oxfam India on 14 January, to understand their concerns and offer support. As I said, that was discussed by the Home Office permanent secretary during the home affairs dialogue in February, as well. Turning to Amnesty, we remain in contact with Amnesty, and officials last met Amnesty International UK on 4 May this year.

In addition to financial regulations, some NGOs and civil society activists have faced difficulties in India as a result of security legislation. We have also raised that issue with the Government of India. Our relationship with India is very important and central to our foreign policy tilt towards the Indo-Pacific. Our 1.6 million diaspora community provides a unique living bridge of people, commerce, ideas and culture between our countries. A year ago, the UK and Indian Governments committed to strengthen our relationship through the new comprehensive strategic partnership.

Afzal Khan: There is no doubt about the importance of our good, strong relationship with the Indian Government but, as I said earlier, Mohammed Yasin Malik and other Hurriyat leaders have today been given life sentences for a very basic thing—wanting freedom. It is India that is occupying that place. As good friends of India, should we not be reaching out and telling it to obey the UN resolutions?

Amanda Milling: There are a couple of points I want to make. No aspect of our strong relationship with India prevents us from speaking frankly about issues with it. On the case that the hon. Gentleman refers to, we are monitoring the trial. We note that Mohammed Yasin Malik has been charged under Indian law, and we cannot intervene in the independent judicial process of another country, but we urge all countries to respect and uphold their international obligations regarding the treatment of detainees. These strong relationships enable us to have meaningful dialogue, and we can speak frankly where necessary.

Our relationship with India supports regional and global security and prosperity. A year into the road map, we have made excellent progress. As has been mentioned, the Prime Minister visited India last month to build on it further. He and Prime Minister Modi discussed the need for democracies to work together. On regional global security, they reiterated their commitment to transform defence and security relations and enhance co-operation in support of a free, open and secure Indo-Pacific.

There are lots of other areas of importance, such as joint work on research and development to deliver next-generation capabilities across land, sea, air, space and cyber. The Prime Minister also announced a raft of commercial agreements to boost our trade, investment and technology partnership. During the visit, UK and Indian businesses confirmed more than £1 billion in new investment and export deals in sectors from software engineering to health, creating almost 11,000 jobs in the UK.

Our Prime Minister also set a target to conclude the majority of talks on the comprehensive and balanced free trade agreement by the end of October 2022—a deal that could supercharge our trading relationship and boost jobs and wages here in the UK. Moreover, the Prime Ministers underlined their firm commitment to take ambitious action on climate change, and co-operate closely to deliver on the Glasgow pact. The visit reflected the breadth and depth of our relationship, and how it continues to deliver for the people of both countries.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful to the Minister for setting out the increasingly close nature of the relationship. Can she assure us that Ministers will make representations to the Indian authorities about the position of Oxfam India in order that it can continue to obtain income from outside the country?

Amanda Milling: As I have said in relation to a number of cases, hon. Members should be reassured that they are raised by senior officials and Ministers. We continue to monitor and raise the difficulties faced by some NGOs in India. We also continue to support Indian civil society and NGOs through programmes and the endorsement that comes from our relationship with them.

Our relationship with India, as democracies and friends, is important and will continue to grow. It is a partnership with the potential to deliver for the people of both our countries and beyond.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of India's foreign contribution law on NGOs.

Agriculture Sector: Recruitment Support

4.35 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered recruitment support for the agriculture sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

The agriculture sector and those who work in it are the backbone of our nation. With energy prices soaring, food shortages looming and concerns over our global supply chains, this debate is incredibly timely. Farmers must be listened to, and my hope for the debate is that we can air some of their voices and fears, and address what it is that they actually need. I hope that the Minister will deal directly in her response with some of the points that I raise. Farmers in rural communities are listening and waiting for real answers.

I will cover two sides to recruitment support. The first is farmers' specific need to recruit workers now—they need them to harvest crops, tend to animals and make sure that we get produce into our supermarkets and on to our plates—and to secure a labour supply for the years ahead. The other is more holistic. There are almost half a million people in the agricultural labour force in the UK. The rural economy, and farmers in particular, are arguably being ignored, putting the entire industry and all those livelihoods—and, arguably, the wider rural economy—in danger.

Let me start with the direct interventions. I acknowledge that the seasonal agricultural workers visa, which is a critical issue in my constituency of North East Fife, falls under the remit of the Home Office, but I hope that the Minister can confirm that her Department has conversations with the Home Office and advocates for the needs of the farming community. The scheme has been beset by problems since its inception. Last year, sponsors were brought into the scheme too late, leaving farmers scrambling to secure their workers for harvest. Farmers have been unable to plan for this year or the years ahead, with announcements about the number of visas and how the scheme would operate made as late as December. Now it is harvest time for those summer foods we love so much, such as asparagus, salad and fresh fruit—North East Fife is famed for its soft fruit—and for flowers and plants for our gardens and homes. For that, we need workers.

I spoke directly to farmers in my constituency yesterday, and at the weekend I attended the Fife show in Cupar. That was the first time the show had been held since covid, and the first time I had attended as MP for the constituency. I have engaged with the National Farmers Union of Scotland and local NFUS members, and they tell me that there are simply not enough seasonal workers, that those who are coming are coming too late, that there is no time to provide training, and that the costs associated with them are going through the roof.

We were promised 30,000 visas. They have been issued—I am grateful for that—but that simply is not enough to cover all the farms in the UK. The Government have told us that that number was based on last year's figures. In many ways, that might seem logical, but I wrote to them last year warning that it would not work,

and I know that the NFU warned them too. I am sure that MPs from rural parts of the country will have heard the same from their constituents.

The delay in setting up the scheme last year meant that not enough farmers were able to apply. For some, the picking season was half over before workers were able to arrive—that was particularly true in Scotland. This year, more businesses are eligible to get workers under the scheme, as one of the few improvements is the inclusion of the horticulture industry. Like the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), I am a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, and we were pleased to visit the horticulture industry in Perthshire earlier this year. However, as a result of its inclusion, 30,000 visas arguably is not enough.

We have been promised 10,000 more visas, but as yet they have not been released. I hope that the Minister will give us an update or go and speak to the Home Office and report back, because those additional visas are needed as soon as possible. When I asked my farmers in North East Fife yesterday what one thing they wanted me to impress upon the Minister in this debate, they said that they need those visas immediately. That is the thing that would make a fundamental difference to them.

When those visas are issued, we need workers to get access to them and then to be able to travel without delay. The farm in North East Fife with its soft fruit crop needs to know the date when its workers will arrive so that it can plan to train them and get its plants picked—we all know that strawberries do not stay fresh for long. What it does not need is what is happening now. Delays in visa processing mean that workers are arriving seven to 10 days later than expected. That might not sound like a lot, but when people are staring at their investment and livelihood, knowing that their chance to realise it is time-critical, seven to 10 days is a lifetime. Arriving late means crops might start to go over and workers will need to be rushed straight to harvest without time for enough training. There are safety implications from that, and we know that there are safety concerns in the industry at the best of times.

Historically, a significant number of workers coming to the UK have come from Ukraine. That is clearly not the case this year, meaning that many staff are new to the task and are not returning as they have done in previous years. They need training to work efficiently and well. Training, which takes time, is not available if they arrive late.

There is a very real side to all this. I was told yesterday of people having to choose between picking their harvest or planting their crops. I have been told of farmers who are already making decisions not to plant next year. They are making decisions to either let fruit rot or face empty fields down the line. In some respects, it is simple. Do the Government want a food shortage now or next year? If nothing is done, that is the inevitable outcome.

I have set out the immediate short-term crisis. I also want to know about the Government's long-term plan to provide recruitment support for the agricultural sector. Every expert in farming and migration in food supply chains says that we cannot rely on domestic workers alone. We are now seeing the tightest labour market in decades, with staff shortages everywhere. Migrant workers will continue to be a feature of farming recruitment.

That is the simple fact. For the arable farmers I have talked about, that means securing a future or some certainty around the seasonal agricultural worker scheme. That means announcements for years ahead being made now so that they can plan accordingly.

Our food supply may be just-in-time, but business planning is not, and just like any other business, farmers need certainty to plan. Indeed, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee recommended earlier this year that announcements be made on a five-year rolling basis. I ask the Minister if she will endorse that plan. It also means considering whether more visas need to be made available. I would argue that the data used for this year's allocation is flawed. The Government must make a proper analysis, looking at demand on a month-to-month basis, to assess what farms actually need to function.

For livestock farmers—I am aware I have not yet mentioned them—future planning requires a proper, long-term solution in order to get the skilled workers they need. We can all remember last year when a lack of butchers led to thousands of animals being culled. The Government responded by issuing emergency short-term visas, but that was too little and too late. One of the issues with these skilled workers is the English language requirement. We can agree that having some level of English—and I have already mentioned safety—will be useful for workers to do their jobs well and to fit in with their wider communities. However, the amount of English needed to work as a nurse and as a butcher are arguably very different. I ask whether consideration is being given to having some flexibility in those rules.

Part of the picture in the long term will be the recruitment of more domestic labour. Agricultural workers and farmers are an ageing cohort, with fewer and fewer young people being attracted. Indeed, in my constituency we have the Scottish Rural University College in Cupar, and I have visited it on a couple of occasions to look at the people who are coming through. There is a big growth in dog grooming, but we are not seeing the numbers that we need coming into other parts of the industry. To reverse this trend, we must make farming an attractive profession. It must start from school, with vocational training and appropriate signposting in job centres. I hope the Minister will say what conversations she is having with the Department for Work and Pensions in that regard.

Turning to the agricultural sector more generally, what is the Minister's plan to support businesses? In Scotland alone, the sector employs 67,000 people directly and supports a further 320,000 jobs. The rural economy is massive. At a time when the Government are saying they want to secure our domestic food supply, what is their actual plan to put food on our plates? If their goal is to have us eating British food and not to suffer shortages from global supply chains that are disrupted, they are failing. In the first three months of this year, we imported an extra £1.7 billion worth of food and live animals compared to the end of last year.

There is lots that the Government could but are not doing to secure the future of British farming. Farmers are under extreme financial pressures, like many of us. Grain prices are up. Energy and gas prices are up. Fertiliser prices are up a staggering 200%. To top it all off, the Government have increased the labour bill by imposing an additional wage requirement for workers under the seasonal agricultural worker scheme.

Many of the farmers I have spoken to entered into contracts to sell their spring produce last year, agreeing a price based on the actual legal minimum wage. I completely understand that supermarkets and other shops do not want to increase prices on the shelves because of the cost of living crisis that people are experiencing. However, the Government's late decision to impose that higher minimum wage cannot be passed on by farmers, so it is taking money directly out of farmers' pockets.

Profit margins in farming are tiny. There are a lot of hard-to-control variables, such as the weather, pests and plants simply not thriving. Imposing unavoidable costs on farmers is beyond unhelpful. Can the Minister say what the Government plan to do to support farming communities during this cost of living and cost of farming crisis? What conversations have taken place with the Home Office in relation to this wage requirement?

Let us look to the future and long-term investment in the rural economy. It is inevitable that more and more agricultural processes will be automated, but that requires investment and training. Are the Government consulting farmers? Where is the plan for support? The sector needs confidence to move forwards. Meanwhile, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee reports notable concerns about the mental health and wellbeing of those in agriculture. Clearly, something is not adding up.

Finally, what are the Department's plans to monitor the impact of other Government initiatives on the agriculture sector? International trade agreements are being made with seemingly no thought to the need to protect our farmers, who have higher welfare standards, from cheaper competition. The Subsidy Control Act 2022 controversially includes farming subsidies in its scope, even though they have always been excluded from state aid regulations. The Act also risks undermining the devolved Governments' abilities to make policies to support their own farming communities with their own specific needs.

Farmers are vital to this country, but they have been let down by this Conservative Government for too long. Recent media reporting shows that the Government know that, and so do farmers. I want farmers to not only survive, but thrive. I want food on our shelves and on our plates. I have been listening to farmers in North East Fife and their needs are clear: 10,000 seasonal worker visas now, an end to Home Office delays, a long-term plan and investment in their future. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.47 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am always happy to support the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) in the debates she brings forward. Obviously, when I saw the subject of this debate, I wished to participate. It will be no secret that I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. Back home, we own land; we are farmers.

The Minister will know that I am especially pleased to see her in her place, because I know that she is someone who sets out to give us answers. I am very pleased with that. I also look forward to the contributions of the two Front-Bench spokespeople, the hon. Members for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner).

[Jim Shannon]

I want to make three points. My first point is about a scheme that is already in place. Secondly, I will refer to the contributions from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs back home in Northern Ireland and the young farmers' clubs. Thirdly, I will refer to the visa scheme, which the hon. Member for North East Fife referred to in some detail. As the Member of Parliament for Strangford, I represent a very urban but also very rural constituency, so I am greatly exercised by this issue. I am particularly pleased to speak in this debate and congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing it forward.

Last week, I learned of a scheme—it was one I had not been aware of—because of an event held in this House. I was particularly encouraged to attend, especially when I found out exactly who was there. It was the 10-year celebration of the McDonald's progressive young farmers programme. I know that the hon. Member for North East Fife was there. From the moment I walked into the Churchill Room, I was beset by Northern Ireland accents. It is such a pleasure to come here and hear my accent bouncing back from other people in some numbers—it is quite unusual in Westminster.

Of the four young people speaking, two were from Northern Ireland. One was young Carys Martin from Greyabbey in my constituency. When she told me who she was, I knew at once—as you do, Mr Twigg—that I knew her mother and father, as well as her grandfather, Billy Martin, who used to be the president of the Ulster Farmers' Union in Northern Ireland. It is a family that is steeped in agriculture production. There were three other young farmers—one was from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart). It is great to see our prominent agrifood work being recognised by McDonald's. It is a great scheme.

Over the past 10 years, the programme has given progressive young farmers the opportunity to kick-start their careers in the food and farming industry by spending a year with McDonald's, tracing every step of the supply chain. Throughout the programme, they receive mentorship from a host farmer, as well as some of the UK's leading food supply companies, and gain in-depth experience in key agricultural sectors. This is a smashing scheme, one that does just what the title of the debate says: recruitment support for the agriculture industry.

The young people on the placement develop the broad range of knowledge needed to succeed in today's world of food and farming. McDonald's success in the United Kingdom and Ireland is underpinned by British agriculture. I am always very proud to say the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—I have said it so many times. It is not meant to be offensive to anyone; it is how I feel. I feel the strength of the Union.

McDonald's said:

"We are committed to sourcing quality ingredients and spend approximately £1 billion each year on our British supply chain."—that is significant, and tells us how important the scheme is. They continued:

"As part of that, we work with over 23,000 farmers across the country to source our products. All our beef is 100% British and Irish and we source all our pork from British, RSPCA Assured farms."

What a wonderful programme this private enterprise has taken on and committed to over the last 10 years. How great to see Northern Ireland playing such a prominent role. The question we must ask is: are we supporting our young farmers and agri-workers in the same way. I believe we are, through the schools and colleges.

I move on to my second point, about the young farmers' clubs of Ulster and those across this whole great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I used to be a member of the Ulster young farmers' club when I was a wee boy in Ballywalter, which was not yesterday. It was a social occasion, but the activities it involved encouraged recruitment support for the agriculture sector, the very title of the debate—good things happen. We have Greenmount college as well.

I know that Minister Edwin Poots of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs meets the Minister regularly—they both tell me the same—which shows a strong governmental and ministerial partnership and input, which is beneficial for everyone, which is really good. I am greatly encouraged by what happens.

I move to my third point, about an issue that the hon. Member for North East Fife referred to. I voted leave in the referendum. By the way, it was a vote for the whole of the UK to leave, and not this—with respect—piecemeal deal that has so adversely affected people throughout the country, particularly in Northern Ireland. We are looking forward to addressing that issue with the support of the Prime Minister and others.

When I voted leave, it was with the understanding that farm workers would continue to have easy access to and fishermen would have easier access to our visa programme. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), has been incredibly helpful in his support for the fishing organisations. The Minister here today works with them regularly—in the corridors of Westminster last week, she told me she had occasion to meet the representatives of the two fish producers organisations, Harry Wick and Alan McCulla. I know she looks forward to that and that they do as well. It is always about how we can help, which is why the Minister is appreciated so much by the fishing organisations.

Some of the agrifood producers, such as Willowbrook Foods in my constituency, have highlighted the fact that things are still complex. I know it is not the Minister's responsibility, but we need to smooth those issues so that we can offer greater support to ensure that no harvest is left in the field and that producers have the support they need. Willowbrook Foods was very keen, along with Mash Direct—two of the major producers in my constituency—to offer help to the Afghan refugees. They were the first people to contact me. The war started on the Saturday and on the Sunday, they were on the phone to say, "Jim, if any of those refugees need placements or jobs, we are here." I am always greatly encouraged by those who take their hands out of their pockets, get them dirty and do the work. Those people—those two companies—are examples of just that.

I will finish by saying that we must offer greater support to ensure that no harvest is left in the field, and that producers have the support they need. McDonald's has sown into their programme; are we sowing to meet our needs? If not then, to the best of our ability, can we do better? I genuinely look forward to the Minister's response. I have in Strangford a constituency that I

believe is second to none—no offence to any other Member of Parliament, by the way. I see people who want to help, and I think that is what the Minister is looking for.

4.55 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, not least because you are so lenient. I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to speak, given that I was not here at the beginning.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for introducing this debate on the hugely important issue of recruitment in the agricultural sector. If we enjoy the benefits of eating food, if we enjoy the environment, if we think tackling climate change is important, and if we think water management and flood prevention or tourism and hospitality are important, then we should be very grateful to our farmers and those who work in agriculture. We should be determined to protect that industry, not do it harm.

My great concern is that the average age of a farmer in the United Kingdom is 59. The Government are transitioning from the old common agricultural policy to the new environmental land management scheme, and while there is a golden goodbye programme in that scheme, which many people will take advantage of, there is no golden hello. My concern is that we are seeing people leave the industry, but we are not seeing people coming into it, either from farming or non-farming families.

The recent closure of Newton Rigg College, an agricultural college outside Penrith for the UK's second-largest farming county, was outrageous and unnecessary. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland directly fund agricultural education there. Why could we not do that in the UK, given that we now have that freedom? Why did DEFRA not choose to invest in saving our college in Cumbria, so that we can reach farming families while also recruiting people from other communities to be the farmers of the future? That seems a terrible wasted opportunity, and I call upon the Government to put it right, even at this late stage.

Young people are not likely to be attracted to agriculture if the opportunity to make a living is badly reduced. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about his support for leaving the European Union. Members will know that I did not agree with him on that. Nevertheless, if I was asked to find positives of us being outside the European Union, I would pick getting away from the perverse incentives of the common agricultural policy.

There is an opportunity for the UK to build a better agricultural policy than the one that we used to have and are moving away from—if we do things right. The intention of the Government to move towards the environment land management scheme, and public money for public goods, is good. I want to be clear that in principle the Liberal Democrats agree with that. My concern is that the transition is being botched, which will damage farming and recruitment into farming, thereby damaging our ability as a country to feed ourselves, care for our environment, and provide the backdrop to the hospitality and tourism industry that is

vital to my community and those in the south-west, as well as rural places such as Northumberland and other rural parts of this country.

I have got about 1,000 farms in my constituency. Every single one of them has lost 20% of its basic payments this year. Of those 1,000 farms, a grand total of 13 will be getting something through the new sustainable farming incentive. What does it mean for recruiting people into farming when they realise that farm incomes are evaporating and new sources of income are not available any time soon? If we care about recruitment into agriculture, surely it makes sense to park the reduction in basic payments while we continue to develop the new environmental scheme, so that we can recruit people into agriculture.

There is a huge problem in rural communities such as mine. Cumbria is the second biggest agricultural county in England—the biggest is Devon. There has been a 70% drop in the number of private-rented properties available to local people in the past two years. Why? House prices have gone bananas because of a huge increase in demand for holiday lets and an increase in the number of Airbnbs. What has that done? It has squeezed out the working-age population. That is affecting Devon and Cornwall, Somerset, Cumbria, North Yorkshire, Northumberland and other rural communities. That is why action is needed right now.

In our community, hospitality, tourism and agriculture are absolutely intertwined. So many farms are viable only because they have diversified into the hospitality and tourism market. If I say that last year 63% of hospitality businesses in Cumbria were operating at less than capacity because they could not find enough staff, that gives a sense of the recruitment crisis facing much of rural Britain. It is caused by three basic issues.

The first is the lack of affordable housing for people to live in. If there is nowhere for the working-age population to live, there is no working-age population and no workforce. That is why, despite the huge demand for tourism businesses last year, there was no availability. People could find a house to stay in for a week, but they could not find anywhere to eat or drink, or any way of having a pleasurable experience on a lake, because no one could recruit any staff.

The lack of affordable housing for a local workforce is a crucial part of the crisis, and the Government's failure to have sensible visa rules is another. If we want to control our borders, great. But why not control them in our interests rather than doing ourselves damage? There is a desperate need for us to use youth mobility visas, for example. We have spoken to the Home Office about them to ensure that we try to do something to arrest the agricultural and hospitality labour shortages.

Finally, we have huge distances to cover in areas such as ours, with very expensive travel and a lack of affordable and accessible bus services. That is another major reason why there is a problem. There is no doubt that in communities such as mine and in Devon, Cornwall and other rural parts of the United Kingdom, a staffing shortage—a recruitment crisis—is undermining hospitality and tourism and undermining agriculture. If we undermine agriculture, particularly at a time such as this, we run the risk of not being able to feed ourselves as a country, which will make us more dependent on imports from other countries. We will put ourselves in the morally questionable position of fishing in the same markets for

[Tim Farron]

grain as the poorest countries in the world, thereby inflating the prices they pay or robbing them of the grain altogether.

I would argue that the farming policy the Government are now enacting, which is almost deliberately designed to reduce the amount of food that Britain produces and the number of farmers Britain has, is not just strategically stupid but morally abhorrent.

5.2 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg, and I commend the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this important debate. Things are at a crisis point in some parts of the UK. I was shocked to discover that seasonal worker shortages of up to 75% have been reported in some parts of the UK. Many food producers, farmers and horticulturists have very real fears that there will not be enough labour to pick their crops this year.

The hon. Member for North East Fife outlined very well the various problems experienced with the seasonal agricultural workers visa scheme and spoke movingly about the conversations she is having directly with constituents who are deeply affected by these problems and shortages. The Government often talk of the low employment rate in the UK—as we all know from sitting in the Chamber, they like to mention it frequently—but the consequence is that there are not enough workers to fill the gaps in supply.

The hon. Member spoke of food security and domestic production—I shall return to that soon—as well as about the increased reliance on imported foods, and asked how farming communities will be supported. She also mentioned automation, which I have to say seems like an impossible dream for many farmers. It is simply beyond their ability to afford the sorts of mechanical pickers and diggers that could make the difference and make them less reliant on agricultural workers' support. It kind of irritates me, to be honest, when it is spoken about as though it is an easy option for your average farmer when it just is not.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) did a fine job of speaking up for McDonald's and its farming support scheme, and he usefully outlined the more general need to attract young entrants to farming. If that is not addressed rapidly with genuine support for younger entrants, the sector will experience problems in the face of an ageing and retiring farming population.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) continued on the importance of doing everything possible to attract new entrants to farming and ensuring that farming continues to be an attractive option. That is such an important point. If young farmers—they might be sons and daughters of farmers—look at the work that their parents go through to make farming a viable career, and think that it will just not be worth it because they do not make enough money to survive, that will clearly affect who becomes a farmer in future. The hon. Gentleman also spent time dwelling on the effects of Brexit, to which I will return, as well as, crucially, the recruitment crisis in rural areas—not simply in farms, but in hospitality and the other organisations around farming that rural communities rely on so heavily.

The SNP has long warned that the obsession of some in this place with Brexit and ending freedom of movement would cause significant problems. The EFRA Committee confirmed in March what we have been saying for years: that although the pandemic certainly exacerbated labour shortages, their cause was ultimately and largely Brexit. We must remember that a disproportionate share of the UK's agricultural workforce—14%—is employed in Scotland. The labour challenges that our industry faces will be keenly felt, as we have heard, and industry bodies have repeatedly cited the shortage of labour as the biggest challenge they face—and they say that, let us not forget, in the face of rocketing prices for fuel, fertiliser, seed and feed, among many other extra costs.

Scotland's horticulture industry, for example, has grown significantly since 2013 thanks largely to freedom of movement. Here is another extraordinary statistic: until the last two years, 99% of seasonal workers in the horticultural sector came from outside the UK every season. Since Brexit, the number of full-time staff has been plummeting, which threatens the delivery of home-grown produce and the viability of so many business. That was made clear to the hon. Member for North East Fife and me when we visited, with Scottish Affairs Committee colleagues, horticulturalists and soft fruit providers in Perthshire and near Dundee. Those providers made it clear to us that without support, their businesses could, and in all likelihood would, go under.

That view is supported by the UK Trade and Business Commission, which found that workforce shortages as a result of leaving the EU have crippled businesses across the country. The commission's annual report identified a “unique set of challenges” for small businesses in Scotland and Wales, which are made worse by

“the UK Government's general reluctance to seriously consult with the devolved administrations, whether on trade policy or economic support schemes.”

We have made cross-party calls to tailor immigration policy to suit Scotland's needs, for example, and I am sorry to say that they have been repeatedly ignored. In January, our Holyrood Parliament voted in favour of calls for the UK Government to reform the immigration system and commit, with the Scottish Government, to a joint taskforce on labour market shortages. The Scottish Government then had to make 19 requests before the Minister for Safe and Legal Migration attended a meeting. I hope that the Minister here today will take that up with her Home Office colleagues.

That was extremely disappointing and brought back memories of a predecessor in that role, who insisted that she would not give any extra powers to Scotland that she would not also give to Lincolnshire. That comment enraged not a few in Scotland. The difference between the second largest nation in the Union and a single English county council seems fairly obvious. Of course, that is not to say that there is not a case for differentiation between English regions as well. The Migration Advisory Committee has acknowledged the need for a more bespoke approach, especially for more remote communities. I wonder whether the Minister can tell us how the UK Government are evaluating that in detail. What proper consideration has been made of that advice? It would be really helpful if she could tell us that, because of the importance of this issue to remote areas and the people who live in them.

Of course, migration is a key lever to address depopulation. Scotland's rural communities are suffering from a real decline in the working-age population, and the salary threshold for the UK's immigration system and the shortage occupation list are not attracting working-age people to them. As a consequence, Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands wrote in January to inform UK Ministers that the Scottish Government intended to press ahead, along with local government and business partners, and explore three proposed models for a rural migration pilot—as the Migration Advisory Committee recommended—to help to address rural population decline and the employment problems those areas are experiencing. The proposals were: expanding the skilled worker route, a Scottish visa aimed specifically at designated areas within Scotland, and a remote and rural partnership scheme. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts on those.

That was followed up in February with a joint letter from the three devolved Administrations, which was prompted by the UK Government's failure to work constructively on the respective migration needs of each nation. That letter called on Ministers to revisit urgently their previously proposed 12-month temporary worker route and called on the Home Office to immediately reintroduce regular quadrilateral meetings with the devolved Governments. I do not know how much say the Minister could have on that, but that would be a useful thing to reintroduce and would go a long way to mending relations with the different devolved Governments.

Unfortunately, the UK Government also failed to consult with the devolved Administration on their introduction of narrowly targeted, short-term temporary visas, which many in the industry just feel is too little, too late. The EFRA Committee's report, which I referred to earlier, identified criticisms of that scheme relating to the number of visas, the timing of their launches, the duration of the visas and the choice of operators to run them. For example, Scottish Land and Estates wrote that the schemes for the poultry sector and HGV drivers "would appear to be wholly inadequate and unlikely to have a material benefit".

As we have already heard from other Members, the cap of 30,000 on the seasonal workers pilot falls far short of the 70,000 visas per year that farmers' unions have asked for. NFU Scotland and many others have warned that if the cap is not increased, we will again see millions of pounds-worth of crops lying rotting in the fields.

The fact that Ukrainians have made up 60% of the seasonal workers scheme since the UK left the EU only adds to the uncertainty. Russia's appalling war is causing devastation in Ukraine, as we all know, while also threatening the security of food supply chains right across the world. Our farmers have long warned about skyrocketing costs for fertiliser, fuel, energy, seed and feed, and the conflict has unfortunately escalated those concerns.

In that context—as again has been commented on, I think, by every Member who has spoken so far—promoting sustainable and resilient domestic production is even more important, but that is not possible without the workforce. Of course, domestic production is also further undermined by the pursuit of laissez-faire post-Brexit trade deals and the possibility of importing cheaper food with lower environmental and animal welfare standards.

The Scottish National party has repeatedly asked for immigration to be devolved to Scotland, so far to no avail, but at the very least we want to see immigration policy being greatly overhauled and properly targeted, with genuine collaboration between the Home Office, DEFRA and the devolved Governments, to ensure that we attract the seasonal and permanent staff that our industries desperately need. I hope that we can hear from the Minister about the discussions she is having with the Home Office on this really important matter and the progress that DEFRA is making in this area.

5.14 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing the debate, and introducing it in such a calm and measured way. We have heard excellent speeches, and the point raised by the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), about the failure to introduce a scheme to bring people into farming, having introduced a scheme to get them out, speaks volumes.

The hon. Member for North East Fife was calm, but frankly I think we should be angrier because what is going on is a shambles. The front page of the *Farmers Guardian* this week says "Exodus", because of the people leaving. Vegetable growers are planning to switch out of vegetables to go into cereals, which is exactly the opposite of what we would like to see. The Government should hang their heads in shame, although not this Minister, as I think the problem lies mostly with the Home Office, which is a Department that seems always to be capable of making a bad situation worse.

This afternoon, we are electing a new Chair of the EFRA Committee. Before Christmas, the previous Chair was incensed by the performance of one of the Home Office Ministers, who was incoherent on the language requirements. Frankly, some of this is so bad one could not make it up. The Conservatives were once the party of business, but they are now the party driving business out of the UK.

The severity of the crisis has been clear for a long time. In August last year, a group of many major organisations—the NFU, the Food and Drink Federation and so on—commissioned a report from Grant Thornton, which pointed out that there are over half a million vacancies out of 4.1 million jobs in the food and drink sector. That situation is only getting worse. We have heard some of the figures, including a 75% shortage of seasonal workers in parts of the UK. As has been said, the situation has now been exacerbated by the tragedy in Ukraine, as last year 67% of seasonal agricultural visas went to Ukrainians and 11% to Russians and Belarusians, so the situation will get worse.

There is an irony in all this, in a sense, because it looks as if we will have to turn to other parts of the world, which will mean bringing people into the UK from further and further afield. These are not people who are returning to the UK as normal, with the requisite skills, which adds to costs and makes things even more difficult for businesses.

Let me focus on a couple of sectors. We have often talked about the pig sector, which was one of the first to feel the problem. Partly because of the lack of pork butchers, we have ended up with 200,000 pigs backed up

[Daniel Zeichner]

on farms and 35,000 healthy pigs culled. That was caused by a mix of factors, but frankly it was because the Government waited too long and were too slow to act, exactly as has been said by other hon. Members.

The horticultural sector is suffering enormously, with some businesses reporting workforce shortages of between 20% and 50%, which is far worse than in the first half of the year. I visited one of our major rose growers in the east of England, which was at pains to point out just how much it depends on a few, key skilled people, whom it cannot get nearly as easily now, because of the difficulties in getting in and out of the country. What will that grower do? It will move production somewhere else—not in this country. That is quite incredible. As we come up to the pinch point for the soft fruit industry this year, I fear that the same will happen again.

We have heard many of the figures. It is extraordinary how slow the Government were to act when they were warned. Looking back at discussions before Christmas, it is extraordinary that some decisions were left right up until the verge of Christmas itself. The number of visas available was much discussed and negotiated, but it was still nowhere near the number that we need.

The Horticultural Trades Association and the EFRA Committee have called for an additional 10,000 visas. The NFU says demand could be as high as 55,000. We are told that another 10,000 visas may be available at some point, but businesses will have to wait until the end of June to learn more. Even when they are allocated, I am told by many in the industry that it takes a long time for issues to be resolved and for people to get here. Unite the Union has told me about the poor treatment experienced by many seasonal workers. Will the Minister comment on what her Department is doing to check on this long-standing problem, which is not getting any better?

We need a better plan for the agricultural labour force; we cannot go on like this. Surely we have to start by having a discussion with employers across sectors in order to know the workforce requirement. I am afraid that we are seeing a failure of workforce planning in so many areas; we see it in the health service, but also in the agricultural sector. We need to take into account the workforce that our businesses need.

Of course we want to encourage the indigenous workforce, but I am afraid that we saw the limitations of the Pick for Britain scheme a couple of years ago. It was mired in rhetorical flourishes, but when push came to shove, it did not work. We have to be realistic about these things. It is no good waxing lyrical and pretending that somehow we will magic up a workforce. The choice will be quite simple: if employers cannot find the workers, as in the hospitality sector, businesses will go elsewhere. We are seeing it with our own eyes, so we need to analyse what is needed, have a proper discussion and ensure that we have the skills the country needs. We will then have a vibrant rural economy. If not, we will be relying on imported food in the future, and that is not a good idea.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I confirm that the debate should finish by 5.43 pm. Of course, the hon. Member in charge of the debate should have some time to wind up at the end.

5.21 pm

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): Do not worry, Mr Twigg—I will not take that long. As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

It is true to say that much of this debate is possibly for the Immigration Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—but I undertake to discuss with him the issues that are specifically for him, and to give feedback as and where necessary. I urge hon. Members either to deal with him directly or to use me as a conduit in the agricultural or fishing space, if that is more convenient.

I, too, thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this debate on an important issue. As I think she knows, I have family links to Pittenweem, so was particularly pleased to hear that the Fife Show in Cupar is up and running again. I hope that she enjoyed that at the weekend, as I am sure many of her constituents did. Her debate has highlighted that there are short-term and long-term challenges to recruitment in the agricultural sector, which was a point ably made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who speaks with such authority on farming issues.

I agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) that we should be grateful to our farmers, but I take issue with his fundamental misconception about our future farming schemes. I agree that we need to keep food production at current levels. Indeed, we have ambitions in DEFRA to increase food production—particularly in areas such as fruit and veg, where we traditionally have low levels—which is why today's conversation is so important. The new entrant schemes will be set out in great detail next year; some details will come out this year, but it was always planned for that point of the agricultural transition.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and I possibly need to have another meeting. This is not the place to go into great detail on the new farming schemes, but I reiterate that our sustainable farming incentive scheme is open to all farmers this year. There is a soil standard—all his farmers have soil and can apply. The countryside stewardship scheme has been taken up by 52% of farmers, so I am sure that many of his farmers will very much be a part of it too. I know the area well, as my husband comes from just next door to the hon. Gentleman's constituency, and I hope we will be spending some time there over the next week. The upland farmers in his constituency, and those who farm on marginal land, will need special, bespoke schemes, and tomorrow afternoon I am going to a two-day upland conference to ensure that we make the right choices and put in place the right schemes for them.

The short-term challenges of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine have been considerable. Last autumn, which was obviously before the war but after the pandemic, we provided a range of emergency visa schemes and other forms of support to some food sectors. Several hon. Members have spoken about the challenges in the pig sector. As a result, we have provided a package of measures, including temporary work visas, which did not include an English language requirement, for pork butchers and, of course, the private storage aid and slaughter incentive payment schemes, which have assisted

in reducing the backlogs of pigs on-farm. We are now undertaking a really serious review of the pork supply chain, the results of which I look forward to sharing with the House.

We heard from several Members that, before the war in Ukraine, about 78% of seasonal workers came from Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. We have been working closely with our seasonal worker visa route operators—I have met all of them—and they have proved resilient and innovative in sourcing labour from new sources, such as Kazakhstan and Mongolia. There is no silver bullet for meeting the diverse and seasonal labour needs of agriculture. That requires action on three fronts: migrant labour, domestic labour and automation. We cannot—and I never would—ignore the current importance of migrant labour to bring in the harvest, particularly in the horticultural sectors, which have particularly high seasonal peaks in demand.

Following a review of the seasonal worker visa route to date, the Government have decided to place the route on a more substantive footing. I remind Members that this is the only such route for visa applications, because the Government recognise that the needs of horticulture and those seasonal peaks are special and different. The seasonal worker route will now operate until the end of 2024, with a further assessment of need to be made as we reach that point. The visa route will no longer be defined as a pilot. I know that the seasonal horticultural workforce are particularly important to Scotland, which produces so many of our delicious strawberries and other fruits. Scotland uses about 13% of the seasonal worker route.

I reassure the hon. Member for North East Fife that, despite the significant challenges that the Home Office has had to deal with this year in dealing with Ukrainian people coming to this country, the process for dealing with seasonal worker visas is much further forward than it was at this point last year. We currently have about 13,000 workers on-farm, with 13,000 who have already completed the certificate of sponsorship stage of the visa application route. I will continue to monitor that extremely closely with the Home Office. I reassure hon. Members that I speak regularly to the Home Office Minister who leads on this matter, and my team do so probably on a daily basis. We are extremely aware of where in the process the applications are at any one time.

I understand the pressures that farmers are under and their concerns regarding seasonal workers' pay, but it is important that we make it clear that these are not low-paid jobs; they are well-paid jobs and it is right that they are rewarded as such.

We have expanded the seasonal workers scheme to include ornamental as well as edible horticultural crops, and have generally worked with the Home Office and the four operators to make the scheme as accessible as possible. As the hon. Member for North East Fife said, 30,000 workers can come to harvest for up to six months, with the potential to increase that by up to 10,000 if there is clear evidence of need. We are currently at the stage, just before the main part of the picking season, of evidencing that need, but I have absolutely no doubt that when we can do so, those 10,000 extra visas will be immediately forthcoming.

I am genuinely reassured by the Home Office figures for this year that it has now dealt with the backlog essentially caused by the outbreak of war, and that it is

now processing visas in much more normal time. I accept that there was a delay in the last two months, but I am assured by the Home Office that that is no longer the case and things are broadly getting back to normal.

Daniel Zeichner: The 10,000 extra visas would of course be very welcome, but surely that puts extra pressure on the 30,000—the rest. Does the Minister agree?

Victoria Prentis: I am not sure that I entirely understand the hon. Gentleman's point. I am sure that if we are able to evidence that need, helped by the agricultural sector, the horticultural sector and hon. Members around the country, the 10,000 visas will be forthcoming. That has been agreed with the Home Office, and I have no doubt that that will be the case.

The Government intend to commission a review of the shortage occupation list by the Migration Advisory Committee later this year. My door is always open to hon. Members who want to feed in to what we have to say about it.

We keep reinvigorating the potential of the domestic workforce—I say that as somebody whose first job was picking plants. We need to improve awareness of and access to the jobs on offer, in both primary production and processing. That includes a greater recognition of the agricultural and processing skills, qualifications and the fabulous careers in our sectors. We have always been clear about the need to shift the UK towards a high-skilled, high-wage economy, and business can and must do more to attract UK workers. I appreciate the challenge, particularly for seasonal work, which by its very nature is short term. That clearly means that it is not attractive to much of our domestic workforce in an extremely tight labour market. I commend the efforts by businesses that have taken steps to recruit more UK workers, and I am glad to see steady increases year on year in this space. Real efforts have been made, and there have been improvements in the numbers.

We are working very closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to develop and deliver a long-term recruitment strategy. With key trade associations, we have developed a regional recruitment approach, which is pretty much what the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) asked for. My colleagues in the DWP and I would be delighted to discuss that with her at greater length if she would like. It uses the DWP's Jobcentre Plus network to foster strong local links between employers and work coaches, and give jobseekers the skills and knowledge they need to enter the sector.

We need to look at the labour and time-saving potential of automation. In many cases in this sector, that will mean machines for moving pallets around. I have never pretended that automation is a complete answer to horticultural labour needs, but more can be done to complement the need for labour and remove some of the jobs that can be done by machines. DEFRA has led a review of automation in horticulture, which will be published soon. It will provide a better understanding of what is required to accelerate the development and uptake of automation technologies in the edible and ornamental sectors.

We know it will take time to have a wide-scale roll-out of automation, but we should be doing it, and indeed we are. There are a number of initiatives across Government

[Victoria Prentis]

to bring such technologies to market as fast as possible, including some of our grant schemes in DEFRA. Our farming innovation programme and farming investment fund have schemes that are genuinely practical and ground-level for farmers to apply for. Indeed, they have done. We had to more than double the money in the scheme because it received such successful, sensible applications from the farming world.

By taking action across those three fronts, we can deliver the workforce needs of agriculture productively and sustainably for the future. I accept that more still needs to be done, and we must do it.

5.34 pm

Wendy Chamberlain: I thank all hon. Members who have spoken this evening. As I have a little time, I will make reference to what they said.

I recognise what the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), said about the work that DEFRA has done and the engagement that it has had. That has been my experience. I have had good engagement with the Scotland Office on my concerns about seasonal agricultural worker schemes, but the Home Office has been a real barrier. The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), and I sent a cross-party letter with the Scottish Conservatives outlining our concerns about the seasonal agricultural worker scheme after our visit to Arbuckle's just outside Dundee. We pretty much got a flat rejection of the quite reasonable request that we made.

I will forgive the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for not hearing my speech, because he is such a great advocate for the farming community in his constituency and elsewhere. I absolutely

agree with him. Indeed, I contributed to his debate on second homes, a number of which are in the East Neuk and Pittenweem. We face a real challenge if we want to encourage domestic workers into the sector; if they cannot live near the sector, they cannot work in it.

On automation, there are clearly some parts of the industry—as I have seen, certainly in later parts of the process—where it is not an option. As consumers, we are picky about our soft fruit, and we are right to be. It is difficult to expect it to be picked by anything other than hand. If farmers do not have the certainty of an income, how can they invest? Arguably, it makes our whole industry less competitive. I am always impressed with the diversity with the farming community. Things like retail and accommodation cannot exist if the core farming business is not there.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I too was at the McDonald's young farmers scheme event. I met three former participants of the scheme, and it was great to hear that they are all still working in the sector. Our role as policymakers is to ensure that they can stay in the sector. I accept that the Minister and DEFRA are not wholly responsible for all the issues and challenges we have spoken about today, but I believe there is a responsibility to ensure that the Department collaborates across Government—on education, for example, and certainly with the Home Office—to ensure that the policies it brings forward are not to the detriment of our farming communities.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered recruitment support for the agriculture sector.

5.37 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 25 May 2022

EDUCATION

Higher Education and Skills in Local Communities

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): Today I am announcing a national programme which will be delivered by The Open University. The Open University will partner with 10 to 12 further education (FE) providers in England to support the delivery of high quality level four and five courses in areas where there is currently limited provision.

As a Government we are working to level up the country, and access to high quality education at level four and above is a vital part of this. There are too many communities who do not currently have access to local, convenient, high quality higher education (HE) and I am determined to address this.

We want people wishing to train and upskill throughout their life to have local access to a new type of HE, focused on providing the higher level skills to meet local employer needs, with shorter courses that deliver the skills they require rather than only three year degrees.

The Open University will be working in partnership with a selection of FE providers and employers at a local level to understand the skills the economy needs and ensure the education system give people those skills.

We know FE providers are at different stages and require different levels of support to take the important step into delivering good quality level four and five courses that employers want. So I have asked the Office for Students to commission an HE sector leader to provide validation and course support to help FE providers develop and deliver high quality higher technical courses that meet local skills needs.

We are delighted that the Office for Students has appointed The Open University to deliver this vital programme. The Open University will work with FE providers who need support developing and delivering courses and having them validated. They will help people in areas currently underserved by HE courses to access a high quality course accredited by a known and recognised institution. The Government are providing up to £10 million to support The Open University with the costs of setting up and running the programme over the next three years.

The Open University is inviting bids now from local FE providers who are ambitious about delivering high quality level four and five courses. They will be announcing which organisations they will be supporting in the autumn, and we look forward to working with them and the Office for Students to level up opportunity.

This new programme comes alongside a £32 million Higher Technical Education Skills Injection Fund for colleges and universities, which will be invested in equipment and facilities to support technical studies, and boost training opportunities with businesses in key areas such as digital, construction and healthcare.

I would like to use this statement to encourage education sector leaders to engage with these programmes of support. Together we can build an even better HE offer that is fit for the 21st century and delivering on the priorities of local employers and learners in every part of the country.

[HCWS55]

Unit for Future Skills

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Alex Burghart): In February, it was announced in the Levelling Up White Paper that the Department for Education would be setting up a new Unit for Future Skills. The White Paper recognises that good information is necessary for the skills system to respond effectively to emerging needs. The unit has therefore been set up to improve the quality of jobs and skills data, working across Government to make this publicly accessible.

Rich sources of information on skills and jobs already exist. However, this information is often held by various parts of Government and in different or incompatible formats. Furthermore, data in the public domain is typically not presented in a way that is most useful for its intended audience, whether learners, providers, local areas, businesses, or researchers.

Today, the unit has officially launched with its first data release. This covers the jobs, sectors and regions people work in after gaining a qualification. This is the first time we have brought together data on higher and further education to make it easier for people to see where their training can take them: for example, showing the routes young people take through high-quality technical education to get good jobs where they live. This data is an early example of what the unit can do, and we will work with others to improve this and release more useful information.

The unit will work extensively with a variety of stakeholders to enrich our employer-led skills system and make it more responsive to the economy's needs. The unit covers England only, but will work with devolved Administrations to share learning and insights.

Alongside the data from the Unit for Future Skills, the Skills Productivity Board has also published its remaining reports, concluding its work. The board is an expert committee set up in 2020 to provide independent, evidence-based advice on skills and their contribution to productivity. Findings from the board emphasise the need for sustained focus on data improvements and formed the basis of the unit's priorities.

You will be able to follow the unit's work and access its products through a dedicated website, which has also gone live today at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/unit-for-future-skills>.

The unit will continue to work with other Government Departments to bring together different datasets and make these widely available, including through APIs—application programming interfaces.

Specific priorities for the unit over the next six months include:

Improved dashboard on career pathways providing users with more detail on which post-16 qualifications support successful employment in specific sectors within a local area—improvements to be designed based on user feedback on dashboard released today.

A skills demand dashboard. Development of a product based on newly available data from the ONS, showing what types of jobs are being advertised in which local area

Research projects on future skills demand forecasting and a UK specific skills taxonomy. The latter will underpin better linking of data, enriching its potential

Roundtables and stakeholder workshops, to gather feedback on the unit's launch products and define its longer-term priorities.

[HCWS54]

JUSTICE

Delivering Justice for Victims

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Today the Government are publishing a draft Victims Bill for pre-legislative scrutiny, ensuring we will deliver on our manifesto commitment to pass and implement a victims law.

We are also publishing a wider package of measures that put victims firmly at the heart of the criminal justice system. These are set out in the Government's response to the consultation "Delivering justice for victims - a consultation on improving victims' experiences of the justice system". The consultation launched in December 2021 and ran for eight weeks. It received over 600 responses, alongside important feedback gathered through 39 engagement events with frontline professionals and victims.

In response, we have set out a wide range of measures to send a clear signal that the justice system must deliver justice for victims. The Government are also announcing the new cross-Government victims funding strategy, which will drive better outcomes for victims by tackling barriers to sustainable funding and ensuring consistent commissioning.

Collectively these measures will amplify victims' voices in the criminal justice process, improve the support victims receive, and strengthen oversight of criminal justice agencies. In doing so, they will help victims to have confidence that there is the right support available and that if they report crime, the criminal justice system will treat them in the way they should rightly expect.

The draft Victims Bill will:

Enshrine the overarching principles of the Victims' Code in primary legislation and set out key entitlements in secondary legislation, to send a clear signal about what victims can and should expect from the criminal justice system.

Introduce a joint statutory duty on PCCs, health and local authorities to collaborate when commissioning support services for victims of sexual, domestic, violence, and serious violence so that services are more holistic and better co-ordinated.

Introduce a statutory definition of Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs) and Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs), accompanied by statutory guidance at a later date, to increase awareness and consistency of these roles.

Place a duty on criminal justice agencies to collect data and keep under review their compliance with the Victims' Code and to take into account feedback from victims about their experiences. It will also introduce a duty for Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to take a convening role in monitoring compliance locally so that there can be a better view of how the system treats victims. As a result, the Victims' Commissioner will no longer be responsible for reviewing the operation of the Victims' Code but will still be able to engage on compliance at a national level through their other functions.

Provide the Justice Secretary, Home Secretary and Attorney General with the power to require criminal justice inspectorates to undertake regular joint thematic inspections on victims' issues, to ensure clearer and sharper focus on how victims are treated.

Require the Victims' Commissioner to lay their annual report in Parliament, and require relevant agencies and Departments to respond to recommendations in that report, to enhance scrutiny of the actions being taken.

Remove the need for victims of crime to raise a complaint via an MP before it can be investigated by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, to simplify the process for victims wanting to escalate complaints against public bodies. This will be an exception for victims of crime, for whom approaching an MP to share a potentially traumatic experience is more likely to be a barrier to making a complaint and does not constitute an indication that the Government intend to remove the 'MP filter' more widely.

The accompanying measures announced within the consultation response will:

Increase the victim surcharge by 20% so that offenders pay more towards vital victim support services. This change is being made via statutory instrument.

Introduce a duty in the Victims' Code requiring the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to meet victims in certain cases before a hearing takes place, where the victim is willing to do so.

Work with criminal justice inspectorates to enhance their oversight of victims' experiences and use ratings to improve performance, including more regular focus on victims' issues and experiences in all inspections.

Improve agencies' communications on complaints, ensuring clear and accessible points of contact to help victims make and progress their complaints.

Raise the profile and professional standing of ISVAs and IDVAs, through the introduction of a non-public register, a network for support providers and an annual report.

Include information about community impact statements in the Victims' Code to promote their use in appropriate cases and amplify the voices of communities impacted by crime.

Work with the judiciary to introduce a Victims' Code entitlement for victim personal statements in the Mental Health Tribunal where the release of offenders is being considered, so that victims are able to explain the impact of the crime on them.

Give victims the right to attend a parole hearing in full for the first time, should they wish to and subject to the circumstances of the case and agreement of the Parole Board.

Allow victims to ask questions within submissions to the Parole Board and require that the Board takes account of these when reaching their decision, so that victims' voices are amplified in the process.

Together these measures will contribute to our plan to give victims the justice they deserve, and build back a better, stronger, fairer country.

[HCWS53]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Recognition of Ulster Scots as a National Minority and Funding for An Ciste Infheistíochta Gaeilge,

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): Today, the Government are recognising officially Ulster Scots as a national minority under the Council of Europe framework convention for the protection of national minorities, and are announcing £4 million in funding for An Ciste Infheistíochta Gaeilge, the Irish language investment fund. This delivers on two of the Government's commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement (NDNA).

NDNA placed an emphasis on respect for, and mutual understanding of, Northern Ireland's diverse national and cultural identities. The carefully balanced package of measures within it will benefit everyone in Northern Ireland.

Ulster Scots have a proud history and a distinct language, heritage and culture, and this recognition will afford them the same status as other minorities in the UK. The recognition of Ulster Scots is without prejudice as to whether they meet the definition of a "racial group" under the Equality Act 2010, as only the courts can rule on this matter.

The Irish language forms another key part of Northern Ireland's rich tapestry of identities, languages and cultures. Through the NDNA financial package, the UK Government will make available £4 million to be provided to An Ciste Infheistíochta Gaeilge for capital grant funding to non-profit organisations promoting the Irish language.

The Government are proud to deliver on the commitments they made to the people of Northern Ireland in NDNA, and today's announcement will support that vision of greater inclusion, tolerance and openness in Northern Ireland.

[HCWS56]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 25 May 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	283	WALES—continued	
Engagements	283	Freeports	278
WALES	273	Railway Infrastructure	273
Cost of Living: Households in Newport West	279	Senedd Representation and Levelling-up Agenda ..	281
Costs of Living: Households and Businesses	275	Shared Prosperity Fund	282
Free Trade Agreements with Australia and New		Trade and Foreign Direct Investment	279
Zealand: Welsh Farmers	280	Universal Credit	281

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 25 May 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
EDUCATION	13WS	NORTHERN IRELAND	16WS
Higher Education and Skills in Local		Recognition of Ulster Scots as a National	
Communities	13WS	Minority and Funding for An Ciste	
Unit for Future Skills	14WS	Infheistíochta Gaeilge,	16WS
JUSTICE	15WS		
Delivering Justice for Victims	15WS		

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
Wednesday 1 June 2022**

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

Wednesday 25 May 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 273] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Wales
Prime Minister

Sue Gray Report [Col. 295]

Statement—(Prime Minister)

Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill [Col. 318]

Programme motion (No. 2)—(David T. C. Davies)—agreed to
As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Ukraine [Col. 344]

General debate

Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953 [Col. 390]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Foreign Lobbying [Col. 115WH]

Stoke-on-Trent: Video Games Enterprise Zone [Col. 137WH]

Cost of Living: Fiscal Approach [Col. 147WH]

India's Foreign Contribution Law: NGOs [Col. 170WH]

Agriculture Sector: Recruitment Support [Col. 177WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 13WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
